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AND

THE MENACE AT HAWK'S NEST

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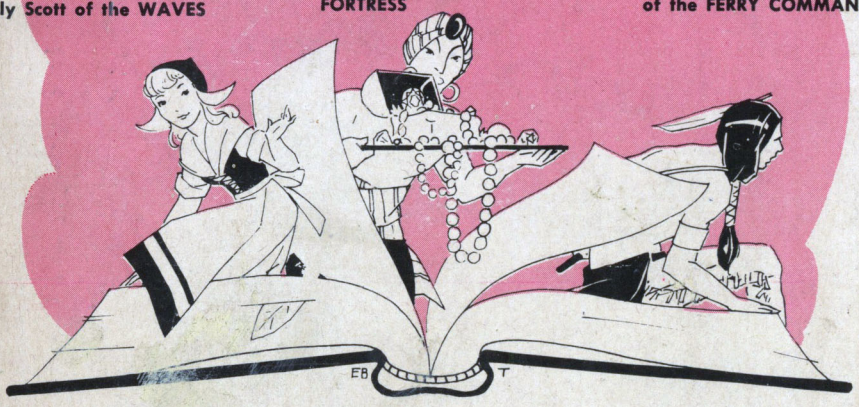

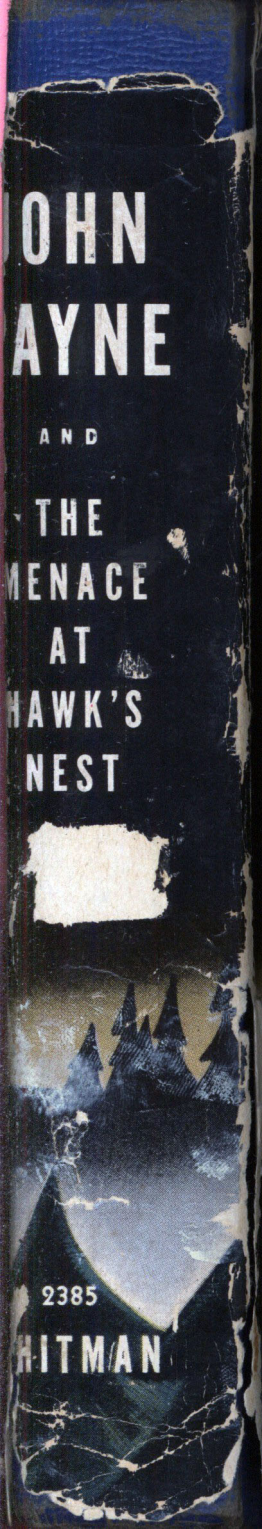
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AUTHORIZED EDITION

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JOHN PAYNE

AND

THE MENACE AT HAWK'S NEST

John Payne

and the

Menace at Hawk's Nest

Story by
KATHRYN HEISENFELT

Illustrated by HENRY E. VALLELY

Authorized Edition

WHITMAN PUBLISHING COMPANY
RACINE, WISCONSIN

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John Payne Was Eager to See His Old Friend

JOHN PAYNE

and the

Menace at Hawk's Nest

CHAPTER ONE

CALL OF DISTRESS

The air was still and biting cold. Snow had fallen, formed a crust, and fresh snow had come again. Flanking the sidewalks and the driveways, miniature mountains rose whitely. In the moonlight, the small ridges and crags were cast in a bluish hue. Out of the cold splendor, gaunt trees lifted empty hands, waiting, praying to the duller blue of the sky. Tangled hedges, lonely shrubs sprang from the mounds of white, their shadows, and those of the trees, twining a thousand fingers over the snow. Here and there, evergreens and spruces stood staunchly, thick with their enduring needles, defiant of change, always the same.

Like a good, a trusted friend. Like Rick Hayford.

Walking along the crusty way, his measured tread crunching crisply, John Payne thought of his friend. It was all of seven months since he had seen Rick Hayford. They had lazed alongside his swimming

pool, soaked the sun like blotters. A far cry from this Northern town. But this was Rick's home. And Rick was joining up, but going to be married before he went. Sandra Davis was the lucky girl. No, they were both lucky. Rick and Sandra were as fine as they came. The wedding would be tonight.

Rick had written several weeks ago, asking if John would come. John had wired that nothing would keep him away. Well, he had come. It had not been easy. There was his own limited time, and the trains were slow, overcrowded. It had taken some doing—but he was here.

John looked ahead. The pathway through the snow made a bend toward the right. The bag he was carrying became heavy. The gift he had brought for Rick and Sandy was in the bag, a treasured old silver coffee urn—almost a museum piece now. John slackened his steps a moment, shifting the bag to his other hand. Hurriedly he thrust the freed hand into his overcoat pocket. Bending his head, he trudged on again, taking his breath sparingly.

Only seven blocks, the station attendant had said. But they were long blocks. John had walked six of them now, a tall, lonely figure making the only moving shadow against the snow.

People were not walking for pleasure this night. They were indoors, close to their fires. John walked on past the twinkling windows, his eye waiting to

catch a glimpse of a picket fence. A white colonial frame house on a corner was what he wanted, the house where Rick lived, and where he and Sandy were to be married. Sandy was an orphan, really, but it had seemed for a long time that she was Mrs. Hayford's daughter. It was right she should be married there.

Over the cloudy veil of his breath, John saw the spiked outline of the fence, the fence itself, and the house. Light glowed in the windows, warm and amber, a promise of welcome from the blue and the cold. The man hurried his steps, turned in through the gate which was open, and hurried up the five steps to the door.

It seemed he had no sooner touched the bell than the door was opened. John had a glimpse of the girl in the doorway, her hair a reddish halo. He heard her cry in startled surprise, "Why—it's—!" And then warmth came, flooding. "It's John! John Payne!" The door opened with a wide sweep. "Oh, come *in!*"

John said, as he went inside. "You're looking great, Sandy." His lips were stiff with the cold. "Kind of chilly up here."

"It's been terribly cold!" The door closed against the winter. The girl ran a long, tapered hand through the maze of red-gold hair. "John Payne! I can't believe it!" she said. "I thought you were the doctor."

"The doctor—?"

Sandra nodded. She looked out through the glass of the door. "I saw your bag—and I've been waiting—." Her gaze went to the stairway directly before them. John followed her eyes. He said, "Is it Rick? Or Mrs. Hayford—?"

"No, oh, no."

"Who then, Sandy? Who's sick?" John's voice in his own ears sounded hushed, subdued, like Sandra's. But the girl did not answer him directly. She seemed to become really aware of him, of the long journey he had made.

They were in a small entry. "Leave your things right here." She motioned to the hooks along the wall, hooks that were forlornly empty save for one short jacket which probably belonged to Sandy herself. "Just anywhere, John. Hurry—we'll go in by the fire. Did you walk from the station?" Her laugh cut in ruefully. "I guess you did—you had to, didn't you?"

John hung up his hat, his coat. He rubbed his hands together.

"All seven blocks," he said.

"Come in here," Sandra's hand was on his arm, propelling him into the long, low living room. Soft white curtains criss-crossed on windows that almost filled two of the walls. There was a wide settee, a mammoth piano—Rick's no doubt. A lamp glowed

on a low table. They walked past it to where the room was joined to a smaller one, a nook under a heavily-beamed ceiling. Here was the fireplace, roaring with a fire of logs.

John said, "Say, this is something!" He went to it, bending down. There was a built-in seat, cushioned in red, at one side. Sandra motioned to it. "Sit down, John."

He seated himself, and the girl came beside him, but she was up almost instantly. "Perhaps I'd better make you some hot chocolate," she said.

"No, don't bother," John spoke quickly. "This is fine, Sandy." He was beginning to feel freer already; the stiffness was going out of him. But there was a restraint in the girl, a tension that remained and communicated itself to the man. He stood beside her, looking down into her face. Her eyes were averted, as though she were straining her ears to listen—to the sound of the doctor's approach, perhaps, or to a voice from the upper part of the house.

Sandra was a tall girl, lovely, with a beauty that owed a great deal to her abounding good health. She was alive and eager. That was as John remembered her when she, with Rick and his mother, had been to the coast. But the Sandra of today, of tonight, this cold winter night, was as different as the mounds of snow from the sun-drenched sand. She was woefully tired-looking; shadows were dark under her amber

eyes. Her blue wool dress had a dispirited look about it, as though she had not taken it off for many hours. Her small feet, in furry slippers, seemed hesitant, keyed for instant flight.

The sickness that was in the house caused all this, John guessed. But who was ill?

Sandra turned to look at him. Again John sensed that she was really seeing him, making herself be aware of his presence. "You're looking marvelous, John," she said, and made an effort to smile. "As usual."

John straightened shoulders in brown wool. The suit, miraculously, betrayed none of the hardships of his tedious trip. His eyes shone a friendly brown, creased at the corners as they did when he smiled. His teeth flashed. "I feel good," he said, "but wait till I get my new outfit. It'll be a knockout."

The girl took her breath in sharply. One hand went to the limp lace collar at her throat. "Yes," she said, scarcely above a whisper. Her eyes came to meet his. "Rick left Saturday morning."

"Rick left?" John repeated. "You mean—he's gone?" It sounded inane, even to his own ears.

The girl nodded. John blurted, "But I thought the wedding was going to be tonight, Sandy." His eyes swept toward the living room, quiet, too quiet, anything but festive. "That's—that's why I came."

"We had to change our plans. Rick was called

sooner. I wired you, John." When he did not speak at once, she said, "Didn't you get my message?"

"No," John shook his head. "No, I didn't get it, Sandy."

"Oh, John—how awful! You came way up here! But I did wire you, I know I did. It was all so sudden. I was so mixed up. But I remember mother saying to be sure and let John know. And I did—or I tried to."

The man was finding his voice. "That's all right, Sandy. It's okay."

But he was thinking of the precious days he had wasted. The four days it had taken him to come here, and the four days, if he were lucky, it would take him to return. He realized that the girl was speaking.

"—and so we were married Friday instead. It wasn't the big affair we'd planned, but it was here, the way Mother Hayford wanted it to be. And now I'm here, too. I'll stay here—for awhile." The girl broke off, listening for a sound at the door. There was none. but the little silence was cut by the pealing of a telephone. Sandra said quickly, "Just a minute, John," and rushed away, her slippered feet moving swiftly, almost soundlessly over the carpeted floor. John found himself staring at the rug after she had gone, watching the place where she had disappeared. Empty. No one there. That was the

way the house was now. Rick had gone. While he was hurrying here, almost breaking his neck to get here, Rick must have been getting ready to leave.

John sank to the cushioned seat, his hands folded on his knees, and stared unseeing into the leaping flames. He heard Sandra's murmured voice. It stopped. There were footsteps going lightly up, a space of quiet, then the steps again, coming down. Presently, the girl came, a little breathlessly, to sit beside him.

She told him, "The doctor can't come tonight, but I think everything's going to be all right. Mrs. Parker's resting easily. I told Mother Hayford you were here and she's so glad. We'll go up in a little while—she doesn't want to leave Mrs. Parker."

John made himself come to the present, to an acceptance of things as they were. "It's Mrs. Parker who's ill?" he said. "Who is she, Sandy?"

"Mrs. Parker—?" Some of the tenseness left the girl's mouth. "Oh, she's an old darling who used to be here when Rick was a little boy. Mother Hayford said she was supposed to be a cook, but she was the best pinochle player in seven states!"

"Um," John said with enough appreciation to make Sandra rush on.

"She came here Saturday, John, just a couple of hours after—after Rick left. I'd never seen her before, you know, but she used to take care of Rick—

and she loved him—and well, it seemed like a kind of a recompense—you know what I mean? Rick left, and Mrs. Parker came. It gave us something to think about. Something to do, too—because she was so ill!"

John was watching the girl thoughtfully. It was his guess that she had slept very little since Saturday when Mrs. Parker had come. And Saturday was three days ago. Sandra was keyed up, beyond the point when she could admit fatigue. She needed to unburden herself. She needed to talk. So John sat quietly, listening.

Sandra read his interest in his silence. She said, swiftly, "Not that I meant to sit here and mope, John. I had plans. But I can't leave for a while, not till Mother Hayford gets used to having Rick away." A smile touched her lips. "She says she'd rattle around in the house all alone."

John nodded. "So you'll stay and rattle with her. That's a good girl."

"I think it's best—for now. And with Mrs. Parker here, so ill! She had a heart attack, John. She'd been under a dreadful strain where she was."

John was looking up toward the shelves which lined the opposite wall of the fireplace nook. There were books there, mellowed into a rosy blur from the fire. There was a clock, too, encased in glass. It made no sound. A golden pendulum moved, not back and forth, but around, to the right, to the left.

The time, the clock said, was almost seven-fifteen.

He was wondering when there might be a train out of town, but he said, "Where was she, Sandy?"

"Up at the Nest."

"The Nest?"

"Yes, the Hawk's Nest—up on Fern Lake."

"Ummmm," John murmured, but he was interested in spite of himself. Sandra gave a light laugh. "Strange name, isn't it? But the place has an iron hawk over the driveway. Mrs. Parker's been pretty weak, but we were so curious. She managed to tell us a little about it. There's this hawk and a whip over the driveway. The place is a big house, built for a sort of a summer hotel, I guess. A man named Nuhart owns it. He calls it Hawk's Nest. It's up on top of a hill near Fern Lake."

"Far from here?" John put in.

"N-no. About two hundred miles."

"I see."

A little silence fell. John watched the golden pendulum going back and forth, back and forth. Seconds were ticking away, whether the clock sounded or not. Time was flying, and he did not have much time to spare. He should be leaving, getting ready to leave. But the present was coming back to him again, the time of *now*, in this white house, where only half a welcome could be given to him. Sandra was saying, "This Mr. Nuhart is an old man.

His granddaughter lives there. Mrs. Parker thinks the world and all of that girl. Leetha's her name. Pretty, isn't it?"

"Sure is," John said obediently.

The girl's hands spread, clasped on a slender knee. "Funny, isn't it?" she said. "Mother Hayford and I've been so busy rushing around, taking care of Mrs. Parker, we're more concerned over her than our own troubles right now. That's what I mean by the recompense, John. It's a queer thing to say, but we've been worrying over this Mr. Nuhart and Leetha to the extent of forgetting lots of—other things. An old man and a girl we don't know—haven't ever seen!"

"But you've *heard* plenty about them," John said.

"I should say so! That's all Mrs. Parker talks about. And why Mr. Nuhart told her she must leave. She'd been there, at the Nest, for nine years!"

"You mean—she was fired?"

"Something like that. She can't understand why."

"It is odd—after nine years."

"Well, that's what's been going on," Sandra said. "I thought I'd better tell you about it." She stood up. "Let's go up and see Mother Hayford." John came to his feet. Sandra did not move for a moment; her eyes held his, grave, understanding. "Even if you missed the wedding, John, and missed seeing Rick—it was still worth it. Mother Hayford will be so glad

to have you here."

"But I can't stay, Sandy."

"Tonight, you can—!"

John glanced toward the nearest row of white-curtained windows, the soft folds that hid the snow. "I'd like to," he said, "but I think I should be getting back myself—,"

"Tomorrow," Sandra said firmly. "She'll love to talk over old times with you. The fun you and Rick had together."

"We—ll," John hesitated, "we'll see."

"That's settled, then." Sandra smiled and took his arm. "Come on, we'll go up. She's in the upstairs sitting room, where she can be near Mrs. Parker. One of us stays with her all the time."

John said, moving along at her side, "You've got your hands full."

Sandra walked ahead. She said, over her shoulder, "But it's worth it, John. She's a dear soul!"

He followed her up the stairs. A white railing guarded the upper floor, and at the railing Mrs. Hayford was standing. She was exactly as John remembered her, a plump, birdlike woman. Her head was on one side now, as she looked at him, smiling. As soon as he came to her side, she took his hand in both her own. "I'm so glad to see you, John!" she said, and the goodness of her was like a mantle flung out over the man's shoulder, en-

veloping him, drawing him. He bent slowly, kissed her cheek. "I'm glad to see you, too," he said. It seemed that a door must open somewhere along the upper hallway, that Rick must come barging out at him. But no door opened. There were only the three of them, Mother Hayford, Sandy, and himself, standing there.

But no, there was the sick woman, Mrs. Parker. From behind the slightly open door to his left, John heard the mild protest of bed springs and was reminded of the woman's presence. He nodded in the direction of the sound. "Sandy told me," he said softly. "How is she?"

The plump hands folded over the red-checked apron. "Some better," Mrs. Hayford sighed. "But she's a long way from being well." Her white head moved in pity. "The poor dear—she's so worried about those people. But I suppose Sandy told you?"

"Yes, Sandy told me."

Mrs. Hayford gave another sigh, with less dejection. It was more a matter-of-fact sound, a taking of things as they come and making the best of it. Her shoulders straightened. "Well," she looked from Sandra to John, "I think we'll go down to the kitchen and make some hot chocolate. Sandy'll stay here." She smiled at the red-haired girl and Sandra nodded. Mrs. Hayford smiled and took John's arm. "Come on, it's my turn now."

But before they could stir from the spot, the telephone jangled, and in that instant it was an irritating sound. It was almost as though it sounded a warning note, a preface to trouble, as, indeed, John soon discovered, it actually was. Mrs. Hayford frowned down the stairs. She said to Sandra, "Hurry down, my dear, before it disturbs her." Sandra looked toward the partly closed door.

"I could take it in there—?"

"Better not."

The girl hurried down without another word, and Mrs. Hayford said, while her fingers twined, watching the girl disappear on the stairs, "There's an extension in that room—but she's resting now—"

Sandra was talking then. Her voice carried up to them, every word clear and distinct. "Yes—yes, she is. Well, I don't know if that's possible. Wait a minute, please—I'll see."

There was a small sound, as the receiver was placed on the table, then Sandra came running up the stairs. Over her footsteps, John heard the voice of the woman in the sickroom. She was calling, almost frantically, "Sandy—Sandy! That's for me, isn't it?"

Sandra said to Mrs. Hayford, "It *is* for her, Mother. What shall we do?"

The woman called again, "Give me the telephone, Sandy. Please hurry!"

Mrs. Hayford came to a swift decision. She almost ran into the room, leaving the door open. "Of course you can take your call, Parksie. Just a minute now." She called out to Sandra, "Hang up when she answers, Sandy," and John seemed to stand in the central point of a whirling circle. Sandra was hurrying down the stairs, the women in the room were making a bustle and a clatter. Out of it, very quickly, there came a cry. It grew, until he was drawn into the sickroom. He saw the woman on the bed, Mrs. Hayford bending over her. She said to John, "Give me that glass of water there, Johnnie. She's fainted!"

When quiet had been in a measure regained, the slender white-haired woman on the bed raised herself on the pillows. She said, looking beseechingly into Mrs. Hayford's face, "It was Leetha. I know it was Leetha! She's in trouble. Oh, something's happened! Something terrible—I know it!"

"There, there," Mrs. Hayford soothed. "Lie down, my dear. You must relax."

"Oh, how can I!" She looked toward Sandra. "*You* heard her, didn't you, Sandy? You were on the phone downstairs?"

"I didn't, Mrs. Parker. I knew you'd answered up here, and I just hung up."

"Well, it was Leetha. There's no doubt about that. She said, 'Is this you, Sooze?' That's her name

for me. She always called me Sooze. And I said, 'Yes,' and she said, 'Sooze, I want to—' and that was all she said. We were cut off. Oh, I'm frightened! Something's happened. I knew it! I felt it all along!" She broke into a paroxysm of wild weeping.

Mrs. Hayford's arms were about her. "Now, my dear, we'll call right back. We'll get her again, and you'll feel better. You be quiet now while I put in the call."

But the call could not be put through. The line, the operator said, was out of order. There was no answer.

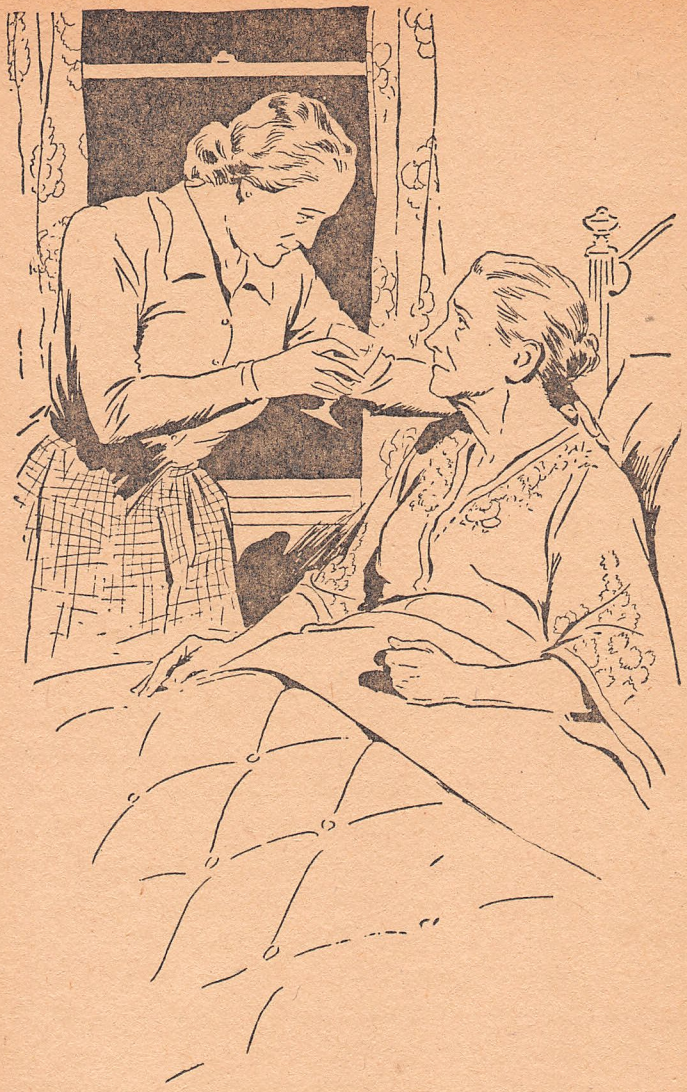
Mrs. Parker's cries were muffled, more piteous because she tried to control her fear. "Oh, my poor little Leetha! Poor Mr. Nuhart! And there's nothing I can do—nothing! If only Rickie were here—he'd find out for me!"

But Rick was not here. He had gone. Sandra spoke quickly, sensibly, John thought. "If you think there's anything to worry about. Mrs. Parker, why don't we call the police at Fern Lake? They could—."

"No!" The woman on the bed seemed on the point of leaping to her feet. "Oh, don't, please don't!"

"We won't, my dear," Mrs. Hayford said quickly. "Not if you don't want us to. But it seems to me Sandy's right in a way. It seems—"

"No, no!" Mrs. Parker pleaded. "It—it isn't any-



Mrs. Parker Looked Up Beseechingly

thing you could *tell* them, don't you see? It's— *inside* the house! It's been there—oh, for weeks! You'd have to *go there* to help them!" There was a thick silence in the room. Mrs. Parker looked at the three earnest faces. Her gaze dwelt upon John's face. "Please believe me," she said.

"I believe you, Mrs. Parker," John said, as to a troubled child, and he thought to himself, "She's by no means delirious. She knows what she's talking about. But the poor thing is mighty sick. And this shock isn't going to help her any."

Sandra came closer to the bed. "This is John Payne, Rick's friend," she said. "He'll be here tonight, Mrs. Parker."

The eyes of the sick woman looked deeply into his. Clear blue eyes they were, eyes that said as distinctly as though she had spoken, "Yes, he'll be here. But we don't need help here. It's needed *there* —at Hawk's Nest!" She said aloud, "Yes, you told me about him, Sandy. You were sorry he missed the wedding." Her eyes closed and her head went back against the pillows. Her lips scarcely moved, but all three of her listeners caught every word she uttered. "If only Rick were here. Rickie would go for me. Rickie would find out."

John said, so suddenly that he startled himself, "I'll go for you, Mrs. Parker."

The eyes flashed open, wide, incredible with hope.

"You will—?"

"Yes, I will."

Mrs. Hayford's hand was on his arm. "But, John, you haven't much time yourself, have you? I thought—?"

John's large hand covered the plump fingers. "I'll take time," he said and turned to Sandra. "It's only about two hundred miles, isn't it?"

The girl seemed to hesitate. She said, "Yes, John."

"You want to see about a train for me?"

Again a hesitation. Sandra looked at him for an instant, and John read a curious mixture of fear and reluctance in her face. But she said, "I'll find out," and went out hastily.

"It's so good of you," Mrs. Parker was murmuring, her cheek against the pillow, her eyes on his face. "I'll be so relieved to know! You'll find out for me, won't you? And you'll hurry back?"

John nodded. There seemed no reason why he could not comply with her wish. He said, "I'll find out, Mrs. Parker. And I'll hurry back."

CHAPTER TWO

RICK'S SHOES

Sandra said, "This is something special. I hope you appreciate it!" She tried to speak lightly, succeeded in bringing a laugh into her voice, but not to her eyes. Worry lurked under the amber lashes.

John pretended not to notice. He leaned back in the wide, red-cushioned chair, one arm flung backward. "I'm about the most appreciative fellow you could imagine," he said, and knew they were words, empty words, almost foolish. He was watching Sandra puttering around, moving from the cupboard to the shining white stove. He saw her measure the sugar, the cocoa, the milk. She had on an apron now, a pretty, silly thing with red flower-pots on it. Against the walls of the kitchen, she made a bright splash of color. Not that the walls were dull. They were papered in a cheerful fruit pattern. Different fruits were pasted on the cupboard doors. It was all friendly enough—on the surface. Except that John felt absolutely out of key. He did not belong here. He had no business here.

But there he was wrong. He had business here. He had made other people's business his. It was

what Mrs. Parker had said, "If only Rick were here!" That was what had started the nonsense. Because that was what it was, sheer nonsense, getting himself mixed up in the place they called Hawk's Nest. Here he was, at ten o'clock at night, going to have a cup of cocoa, and then he would take a train for this out-of-the-way spot; he would barge in on people he had never met, never heard of a few hours ago, and he would try to find out what fearful thing had happened to them!

If anything were wrong, it was, as Sandra had suggested, a job for the sheriff. The chances were that there was a storm, or some reasonable explanation for this girl's, Leetha's, interrupted telephone call.

Mrs. Parker was ill. She was old. This was all in her imagination. In all probability, she was no longer able to carry out her duties at the big house and was, therefore, dismissed.

So he argued with himself, but it did no good. At the back of his mind, he knew that there was some truth, some ground for the woman's fears.

And Sandra knew it, too. There was a hush about her, different from that when he had first come into the house. She had been edgy enough then, but it was with worry over her patient. Now that worry had extended itself. She was worried about what was happening at that outlandish-sounding house—and she was worried about him, about his going there.

She had gone into the sickroom for a time, and Mrs. Parker must have communicated something of her fear. Then she had asked for Mrs. Hayford. There had been consultations, telephone calls, and now, in the kitchen, it was Sandra who was finally making him the hot cocoa. Mrs. Hayford was upstairs. The house was unearthly still. Sandra stood at the stove, stirring the mixture. A sweet candy smell began to grow.

Keeping up the pretense, she looked over at him, her cheek half hidden by the soft fluff of bright hair. "We don't have cocoa *every* day, you know. But you'll need something hot if you—." She broke off.

John said, "Um-humm," and waited until she came to the table. She put a cup and saucer before him, poured the steaming liquid into a pitcher.

"What'll you have, crackers or some fruit cake? There's some left from Christmas."

"Crackers. I never eat month-old cake."

Sandra went to the cupboard. She made the big paper box rattle as she lifted out a handful of crackers. "Our fruit cake improves with age," she told him. "And it isn't a month old—it's all of six weeks. Mother Hayford and I did our bit of baking early."

John wished she would stop talking, or talking about unimportant little things. Who cared if the cake were a year old?

She put the crackers before him and sat down.

"Well—?" she said.

"In a minute," John nodded. "Let it cool." He bent forward. "The train leaves at eleven, that right?"

"Ten to."

"Ten to, then. And gets in there at three A. M.?"

"About that." She was busy looking at something in her pocket, a thimble. She stuck one finger into it and began moving it around with the other hand.

"You aren't very keen on having me go, are you, Sandy?"

She looked up, startled. "I—?" she said. "Why—I, —I think it's wonderfully kind of you, John. It'll set Mrs. Parker's mind at rest. She'll know then—for sure. And everything's all settled. I couldn't reach the Hawk's—," she stopped and corrected herself. "I couldn't reach the Nuhart home, but I got those other people, you know—the Woods."

John nodded. "Theo and Frankie," he said.

"Yes. They live near by. Mrs. Parker says Theo will give you a ride over in the morning. He'll meet the train, too."

John knew all that. He had stood by while Sandra put in the telephone call, and she had told him in detail immediately afterward. She was in no way informing him of the plan now; she was rather repeating it for her own satisfaction, as though she wanted to assure herself that it was right, that it made sense,

that it was safe.

But still she had not answered his question. She had not said that she wished he would go.

John put his spoon into the cup, stirred the dark liquid. He took a swallow. "Perfect," he pronounced.

Sandra's hand was on his arm so suddenly that he almost spilled some of the steaming drink. "Oh, I *don't* want you to go, John!" she said in a rush. "I don't know why, but I don't! When she said, 'If Rickie were here, he would go,' do you know what I thought? I thought, I'm glad Rick isn't here! I'm glad he can't go—because I'd be worried sick! And having you go is almost as bad. If anything happened to you—!"

"Nothing's going to happen to me."

"—I'd never forgive myself! I feel as though I should call the sheriff myself—and not tell her!"

"You can't do that, Sandy. You gave your word."

"What's my word—If I let you go into something —something—!"

"Something what?" John felt warmed by the drink. He grinned. "After all, aren't we making a mountain out of this mare's nest?"

"Hawk's Nest," Sandra corrected and shuddered. "Isn't it an ugly name?"

"I've heard better," John admitted and bit a cracker noisily.

Sandra glanced swiftly toward the dining room. The steps went up from there, up to Mrs. Parker's room. "When she was worst, the other night," the girl's voice was hushed, "she was talking. Nothing that made much sense, just in scraps and bits—but I heard some of it. She said Mr. Nuhart was a prisoner, and she kept saying over and over again, 'Poor Leetha!' She mentioned another name, I think it was Alfred something. And, oh, yes—Oberg."

John finished the cracker, drained the cup. "But still there's nothing to strike terror, is there?" he said easily. Now that Sandra had broken her shell, had openly admitted her fears, he perversely was bent on denying his own. "It'll go like clock work. I take the train. I get into Fern Lake about three A. M. Theo Wood meets me. I go home with him and give the sun a chance to rise—and then—," he spread his hands, "I pay my little social call. It's quite simple."

Sandra said nothing. She simply looked at him.

"Of course," John added, " a change of clothes will help." He glanced toward the stairs. "I wonder if Mrs. Hayford's had a chance to dig up that old outfit of Rick's? I'll have to be getting ready."

Sandra caught her breath sharply. "Oh, yes, she must have it ready by now." She rose, but hesitated. "I guess I'll wait—till she comes down."

"Might be better. Do you think she'll mind—having me wear Rick's clothes?"

"Mind—?"

"Y-Yes. I mean—."

"Seeing you in Rick's clothes? I don't think so. I think she'll be glad. Mother Hayford's like that."

"I know."

There was a small silence. John looked quietly at the girl. He was wondering if *she* would mind. She must be missing Rick, too, missing him plenty. But her eyes were still on the stairs. "I think Mother Hayford's coming now," she said, and seated herself again. Reminding herself of her duties as hostess, she looked into the pitcher. "You didn't finish it, John," she said, and filled his cup a second time. "Please drink it all. It's so cold outdoors."

John said, "With pleasure." He lifted the cup. "You can make me some more—tomorrow night, when I get back."

Sandra said, startled, "Yes—tomorrow night." She sighed. "I'll be so glad when it's over—when you're back again." She watched him drain the cup. "But how will you get *in there,* John? What will you do?"

"Do? Knock on the door, I suppose, or ring the bell, as the case might be."

"I don't mean that."

"I know." His face sobered. "I thought of that. I'll have to have some reason for coming. I think the Woods can supply that."

"The Woods?" Sandra, her mind elsewhere,

sounded blank.

"Theo and Frankie," John said. "When you said a friend of Mrs. Parker's was coming in at three in the morning, they said okay. I figured they must be trustworthy souls. Meeting a train at that hour, on a night like this—!" John left the rest to the girl's discretion.

Sandra smiled, really, and for the first time since his coming, she looked like the vital, happy girl he remembered. "Of course!" Sandy said eagerly. "They'll know what to do. And they live near by, John. You won't be alone."

They both heard the steps and turned. Mrs. Hayford was coming, her arms laden. Sandra was still smiling, and the smile carried them both over a bad moment. She was not so concerned over seeing Rick's battered boots, his cowpuncher shirt and heavy jacket as having the older woman carrying the burden. She said, "Mother Hayford, why didn't you let me help you!" But John was there, and received the things. Mrs. Hayford said, a little breathlessly but quite calmly, "I thought you'd better change by the fireplace, John. I don't want you clumping down the stairs in these awful boots, waking her again." She nodded to Sandra. "I think she's sleeping for keeps now."

Sandra said, "Oh, that's good." They were in the dining room, a pleasant place with an open cup-

board filled with bright plates. There was a small clock on a shelf. Sandra looked at it. "Oh, you'd better hurry, John!" she said.

"I will," he told her, and grinned at Mrs. Hayford. "By the fireplace?"

"Yes, my dear. Right around there."

"I know," John said and disappeared with his load. His bag was in the entry. He picked it up as he went by. With good luck he reached the fireplace nook without dropping the boots. Cautiously he removed the coffee urn from his bag. He placed the lovely thing on the table in the living room. There was a card attached to it. He planned to say nothing of the gift. Sandra could discover it later. It would be a happy surprise.

"I hope," John said under his breath, and frowned. Wedding gifts seemed far from Sandra's mind, out of key with the place as it was. John could hear the women whispering in the kitchen. "I'd better get going," he said in a muttered voice and made the change of clothing in less than ten minutes. He and Rick were almost the same size. The heavy shirt and corduroy trousers felt comfortable enough. He stepped into the boots, laced them up. Standing, he took a deep breath and stretched out his arms. A yawn started, but he quickly suppressed it. Mrs. Hayford was near the entry. She called out, "Ready, John?"

"All set," he said. "I'll just cram my suit into my bag—,"

"Don't, please! I'll hang it up for you."

"Okay." He came around from the nook, toward where she was standing. Back of her, through the glass of the front door, he could see the blue-white mounds of the snow. It was not inviting.

Mrs. Hayford sensed some of his feeling. "I hate to have you going away at this hour, John," she said. Her eyes went briefly over the shirt, and it seemed her mouth tightened for a moment. But thoughts of her son she thrust aside, thinking of this young man, Rick's friend. "You should be going to bed now."

"I dozed some on the train coming in," John told her, omitting the small detail that he had done his dozing penguin fashion, standing up in the packed day coach. "And I'll probably grab forty winks or so on this trip," he added, one hand on her shoulder. "Don't you worry about me now, will you?"

"N-No." But she did not sound assured. "You must promise me to go right to sleep when you get to the Woods' place. Theo will meet the train. He's a thin man—with whiskers."

"He'll probably be the only one there," John smiled. "I won't have any trouble finding him."

Mrs. Hayford's eye went over him briskly. "I wonder if you should take your overcoat—if that

jacket is warm enough."

John had it over his arm. He began putting it on. "This'll be enough," he said. "I've got my shaving kit and toothbrush in my pocket here. I think that's all I'll take."

"All right, John." Her chubby hands were on his arms. She looked up into his face. "We'll be looking for you tomorrow night."

"That's a date!" John bent and kissed her cheek.

"You're a dear boy," she said. "If it were anybody but Susan Parker, I wouldn't let you go. But I feel certain there's nothing wrong—and it'll set her mind at rest."

Sandra was in the shadows of the dining room. She came forward.

"And he'll be with the Woods, Mother Hayford. It isn't as though he were going alone."

"That's right." She patted his arm lightly. "Good luck, John."

"Thanks, Mrs. Hayford. I don't see why not."

Sandra put out her hand. John took it. Her fingers were like ice. But she was smiling. "You know the way to the station?"

"You bet." He grinned. "I just came from there."

"We rush out guests!" Sandra said. "But we'll make it up to you on the return trip. Just try and get away then!"

"Well—?" John's hand was on the door knob. "So

long," he said, and opened the door. "Oops, my gloves!" he remembered and dug into the pocket of his coat hanging in the entry. Then he was out and going down the steps. He heard the duet of good-byes, heard the door closing. He was back in the grip of the cold.

But now, as he became a part of the quiet moonlit night, John was less aware of the snowbound world about him. For one thing, he moved more freely in the boots and breeches; for another, his thoughts were ahead, to his destination. He was bound for Fern Lake—and the Nuhart home, better known as Hawk's Nest. It seemed incredible.

Not five hours ago, he was coming here, prepared to congratulate his friend, Rick, heartily. But congratulations were not in order. There was sickness in the Hayford house and a sense of stealth, then a strange fear. He was a part of that fear now, though he sought to quell it. There was something—not right—at Hawk's Nest. Mrs. Parker might be ill; she was ill. But she was no scatterbrain. She was a lady of sense. Mrs. Hayford thought a great deal of her. She seemed a part of the family. A part of Rick's family.

And John was Rick's friend. He could not do otherwise than assume a duty Rick would gladly have undertaken. He was, literally, stepping into Rick's shoes.

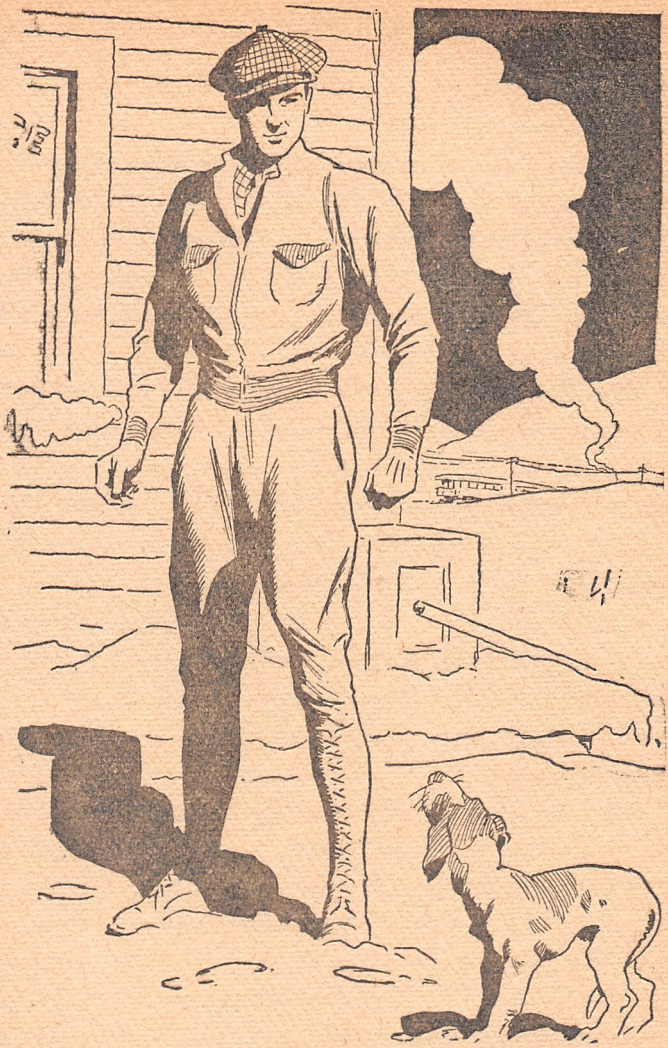
They were comfortable ones, these boots. Plenty of room despite the thick woolen socks. John strode along, covering the distance to the station with ten minutes to spare until his train came in.

He waited outdoors, along with a handful of people. It might be possible that he would get a seat this time. Even so, sleep would be out of the question. He was too keyed up for sleep. This was a crazy thing he was doing. He had a feeling, as he stood there, peering down the tracks, that he was outside of himself, looking in at some stranger.

The train came, wailing forlornly. It was encrusted with ice. John wasted no time in entering. He was pleasantly surprised to see not one vacant seat, but several. He sank into the red plush depths.

In due time, his ticket was taken, and he gave his futile attention to peering out into the blankness of the night. The window gave back a hazy reflection of his own face. It appeared unnaturally thin and drawn. John reflected upon the thin face of Theo Wood, the man with whiskers, who would meet him. Then his eyes closed and he slept.

He awakened to the prodding hand of the conductor. He leaped up immediately, grabbed the cap that he had placed in the shelf overhead, and went out. But he was not wholly awake until he stepped upon the frozen platform. He was the only passenger to alight. He was the only human being there



Only a Small Dog Welcomed Him

as the train pulled out. Only a small black dog came to bid him welcome.

The animal whimpered once in delight, came forward with a rush. He sniffed at the boots, and his enthusiasm faded. As clearly as though the dog had voiced his thought, John knew it. He was meeting this train, meeting every train, waiting for someone else to come.

The dog whined, turned away, and padded softly along the path through the drifts. They were high peaks of snow, higher than John had heretofore seen. The dog was a black mark disappearing. John felt a curious sense of loss. He wanted to call the dog back. Instead he looked about him.

He was under an arc lamp, the only light near the low, two-room station. To the right, rising on a hill, was a village. The brilliant moon marked the roofs, the windows. Only two lights shone, and they were far away.

A road led up the hill, but there was another, running parallel with the tracks, to the left. Moving closer to the station, John looked down this road. It seemed, in the distance, he could see a moving object. He heard a silver sound. Sleigh bells. It might be Theo Wood. John moved along the road and became conscious again of the cold. Not only the cold, but the forlorn chill of being out of place, a lost and lonely soul in an uncaring land.

The sleigh bells drew nearer. John saw the white horse, the cutter. He stepped aside and the sleigh stopped. The horse turned a baleful eye in his direction, blew out a frosty-flecked mouth. A fur-clad mound in the cutter moved as a hand lifted. "You John Payne?" a reedy voice inquired.

John said, "That's right. Are you Mr. Wood?"

"You guessed it, son. Hop in." He threw back a long-haired fur robe and, with one step, John was up and settling himself underneath it.

"Sorry I was late," Theo Wood said. "But she's drifted again back there by the Nest."

"I didn't wait long," John said. "You've certainly had a lot of snow up here."

Theo Wood reached toward a whip. He did not take it out of its notch, but only shook it, a prearranged signal for the horse. "Get up, Rosie," he said fiercely, and the horse surged forward. They went on straight ahead, came to a place where the road turned and Theo Wood settled back.

"Yep," he said. "We got snow. About all we have got."

There seemed no answer, nor was one expected. A silence fell. John looked about him. The road seemed to lie between two ridges of high hills. They rose steeply on both sides, broken by the dark clumps of evergreens.

John said suddenly, "It must be great here in the

summer."

Theo Wood laughed. "Y' don't like the cold, eh, son?"

"Oh, sure—but—."

"Don't mention it. Neither do I. Not when it gets this cold—an' stays that way."

John liked the man. Despite the fact that he was bundled in fur, he made out the sharp features and the moustache. It was a generous one. A mittened hand came up, brushing aside the frost from the outstanding tips. Theo Wood said, looking over at him, "So you're comin' t' see Mister Nuhart?" Before John could answer, he went on, "The girl that put in th' call says you're a friend of Susan Parker's. She's been took sick, I hear."

"Yes, she's sick all right."

"Wore herself out, if y' ask me. There was a time when she used t' come over t' our place an' chew th' fat with Frankie. But not lately—not for a coon's age."

John said, "Do you live near them? Near Hawk's Nest?"

"About half a mile. Just a nice walk. She could've come if—" The horse gave a sharp forward plunge. Theo Wood tightened the reins. "Behave yourself, Rosie!" he said sharply, bending forward. The horse shook its head. A spray of moisture blew back against John's cheek. They moved on again, and

Theo Wood settled back. "Rosie's not so crazy about this weather," he confided. "Not as young as she used to be." He looked squarely at John. "What was I sayin'? Oh, yes—about th' Nest. It's a mile from th' town."

"I see," John said. "Have you lived here very long?"

"All my life. Born and raised on my place. But Frankie," he seemed to expand, "Frankie come from Kansas. She was a schoolmarm. Taught our school here an' boarded with my ma." He gave a low chuckle. "I guess she's forgot all about Kansas by now."

"She likes it here?" John encouraged.

"You bet." He nodded. "But she liked it better when Susan'd come over. Susan's edjucated like she was, and they could gab about this an' that." John heard him sigh. "But things've certainly changed around here."

"That right?"

"Yes, sir! Why it must be a year since I seen old Lyman Nuhart. Yes, sir, a year ago last Thanksgiving! He used t' come up here every summer since 1928. That was when he took th' place. It used t' be called Fern Lake Lodge. But he had that hawk put over th' drive there. I'll show you when we pass it. A night like this you can see th' thing from th' road. It's made out of iron, I'd say, and sittin' there on a

whip, right over the driveway arch. If y' ask me, I'd tell you it ain't pretty."

John made an appropriate murmur. He was trying to sift the gold from the flowing sand of Theo Wood's chatter. Lyman Nuhart had owned the Hawk's Nest since 1928—for about fifteen years. He used to come up here every summer.

John said, aloud, "And now he stays here the year 'round?"

"Seems so. The mailman still brings his mail there, he tells me. And once I heard him talking on th' telephone—party line, y'know." John could not see the man's face, but he sensed that he was frowning. "He's got a fellow workin' there named Borton, Alfred Borton. And I'm pretty sure Oberg's there yet."

John remembered the name. He said swiftly, "Yes, he is. Mrs. Parker mentioned that name."

"She did, huh? Well, then, like as not, Dud's still there then, too. Dud's his grandson. And old Gran, too, mebbe. That's Oberg's ma." Theo Wood clicked his tongue in sympathy. "Oberg can do anything. If he wanted t' have his ma stay there, Mister Nuhart'd have t' let her or Oberg'd quit."

John said, "I—see."

Theo Wood resumed, "And there's Leetha, a' course. If Mister Nuhart's there, you can bet your bottom dollar that girl is, too. He won't let her out

of his sight! She's a pretty, scared-lookin' little thing. Oberg used t' work for her ma, and then when she was killed in that train wreck, Oberg brought Leetha here to th' Nest. They both jest stayed."

John was trying to sort the people in his mind. Lyman Nuhart, and his granddaughter, Leetha. Oberg, his grandson, Dud, and his mother who was called Old Gran. Then there was Alfred Borton.

"Quite a houseful," John observed, and felt Theo Wood's hand on his arm. "There's th' place now," the man said, his voice dropping almost to a whisper. "There's room for 'em—and then some. Big, ain't it?"

Theo Wood must have had his hands on the reins, admonishing Rosie to halt, for the sleigh stopped. John looked upward to the right and saw what appeared to be an immense house growing out of a hill. A second glance showed that there was a triple line of stone walls breaking into the ascent, a long, winding stairway leading upward. The steps were discernible, marked with an iron railing. From out of the topmost terrace, the house rose in a sharp point. A lesser point was the roof over the doorway. To the right was the archway, and, as Theo Wood had promised, John could make out the metal hawk. The white of the snow-clad hills was back of it, and John could see the outspread wings, the upraised, sharp beak. What twined at the bird's feet must have

been the coils of a whip.

How long they paused there, John did not know. Presently he felt Theo Wood's hand on his arm and he turned. The man was looking upward, toward the house. "Susan thinks there's some funny business goin' on there," he said, almost as though speaking to himself. "Well, I got a hunch she's right. Yes, sir, I got a hunch there's some funny business goin' on there at th' Nest."

John said nothing. But he agreed heartily with Theo Wood. "Funny business," however, was not what came to his mind.

He felt a surge of distaste toward the immense, rambling house. It seemed, in the moonlight, that the hawk's wings moved, that they were spreading their dark mantle toward him, drawing him against his will. His spine prickled and his head felt taut. Biting in deeper than the cold, he had a sharply defined premonition of disaster, of direful things to come.

He started to speak, but made no sound. He cleared his throat.

"Let's get going," he told Theo Wood. "I'll go over the first thing in the morning."

CHAPTER THREE

EGGS FOR HAWK'S NEST

Fortified by three hours of sound sleep under a feather bed in an icy-fresh room, and a substantial, delicious breakfast, John set out for Hawk's Nest in an almost optimistic frame of mind.

Frankie Wood had been responsible for his rise in spirits. She had provided the bed and the good food, but above all it was her calm acceptance of the rightness of things that encouraged him the most.

Certainly, she admitted, she had missed her visits with Susan Parker. But Susan was busy. The weather had been bad, first with the rain and now with all this snow. Hawk's Nest was a big place to look after. How could Susan come over every time she wished? She had telephoned them from time to time, when Mr. Borton would permit it. Mr. Borton, it seemed, was something like a secretary to Mr. Nuhart.

Frankie Wood was to Theo Wood as Jack Spratt's wife to Jack. She was as round and fat as he was long and lean. Her cheeks were a ruddy pink, her mouth large and red, her hair a mass of brown curls. Even Theo Wood seemed to lose much of his fear of the Nest as he watched her, listened to her.

"Theo has such an imagination," she said fondly, and her husband flushed like a boy caught stealing jam.

"Now, Frankie—!" he said.

John trudged along the way they had pointed out, the short cut that the Woods took to get their mail. They had their farm on top of one of the numerous hills and kept a path open down to their mailbox. John was to follow this path, then keep to the main road. He would go toward the back of the big house, for the front entrance could not be safely used at this time of the year. The stone steps were treacherous with ice underneath the snow.

The sun was bright, blinding bright. The wind had died somewhat. John walked carefully, carrying the basket Frankie Wood had provided. It was to be his card of admission, that basket, loaded with three dozen eggs and a generous pat of butter.

"Just say it was a long time since I'd heard from Susan," Frankie Wood told him, "and say I got to wondering. Then you came passing by and I asked you to please stop in and see how they all were."

It sounded so simple, so natural.

John had grinned. "Eggs for Hawk's Nest," he said.

Frankie Wood's red mouth laughed. "And you'll find there's no trouble hatching," she said. "Now, be off with you. Stop back again, and Theo'll take you

to the depot. There's a train out at six tonight."

It was as easy as that.

Only there was that one flaw, that imperfection. It was nothing you could talk down, for nothing had been said. It was the unspoken word, the doubt that smouldered in Theo Wood's mild blue eyes. He wanted to believe what his wife believed. He wanted to share her firm conviction that all was well with the people at Hawk's Nest.

But he did not. He was like a man biding his time, hoping for the best, yet anticipating trouble. Once he started to say, "I lived here longer'n—," But Frankie had stopped him. He could not say that he had lived here many years before he knew of her existence, that he had known Lyman Nuhart from the time of his coming to Hawk's Nest. He could not say that while he had no proof that things were wrong.

Theo Wood held his peace, and John made himself forget the gloom gathered in the blue eyes. He held to Frankie Wood's belief that "Theo had such an imagination," and built upon this, accusing himself also of entertaining flights of fancy. Something was out of order, perhaps, John told himself, but nothing too alarming. Nothing that could not be explained, remedied. In nine or ten hours from now he would have accomplished the mission that would have been given to his friend. The thing would be

over, done. He would be taking the train back again to the Hayfords—and then home.

The boots, excellent in deep snow but not trustworthy on the ice, seemed suddenly to shoot out from under him. By a small miracle, John kept his balance, and brought the basket to no harm. He kept his eye intently on the path thereafter, and, until he reached the lowest level, he did not pause. Then, as though drawn, he turned and looked back. Frankie Wood was standing in the doorway. She saw him turn and waved. John waved back and went on.

He came to the main road, and followed its uneven trail. The hills were close to him at the left. To the right lay the lake, Fern Lake, from which the village also drew its name. Bare trees and scattered brush outlined its snow-covered surface now. It was a good-sized lake, and the thought came again to John that it must be a beauty spot when nature was green.

It was about eight o'clock now. There was no one on the road, save himself, perhaps because of the early hour. In the distance John heard the whistle of a train. He thought of the little black dog. He would probably be meeting the train. John reflected suddenly that it would be pleasant to have a dog at his side, darting about, barking now and then. This was a lonely country.

He shifted the basket gingerly and put his free

hand into Rick's jacket pocket. His fingers found the pipe and the pouch of tobacco. There were matches, too. John paused, set down the basket. He filled the pipe, lighted it, then resumed his walk.

"Wish I'd found this sooner," he murmured aloud, expelling a fume of fragrant smoke. And after that he felt less lonely.

He thought about the Woods. They were good people. He had been "John" right from the start. A frown suddenly creased his forehead, as he realized that the name "John Payne" meant nothing to them. He was simply a friend of Susan Parker's. But the Woods were away from the busier world, on one of its bypaths. Would the same apply to the members of the household at Hawk's Nest? Would he be recognized?

"Not that you're such an all-fired important fellow," he told himself. "But you have been in the public eye."

He had stopped and was standing still, puffing furiously at the pipe, Rick's pipe. And he was wearing Rick's clothes. Why not say he was Rick Hayford and let it go at that? If anyone noted his resemblance to an actor, he could take it casually, say that it had happened before. It was a large world, bound to yield duplicates now and then.

That was the keyword, casual. Easy, thought John, does it.

He was nearing the place where the pathway led up the hill toward the back of the big house. The Nuhart mailbox, its base hidden in the snow, was a silent reminder to turn here. John looked upward, but from this spot he could not see the place. He gave a sigh and repeated under his breath, "Easy does it." Cautiously, he began the ascent.

When the roofs of the place came into view, and then the whole side view of the structure, it was with some difficulty he held to his determined thought. Hawk's Nest, rising on its stone foundation, soaring in heavy timbers, looked more like a fortress to be assailed. The driveway was at the other side of the house. The outspread wings of the black hawk were not visible from here. John felt a sense of relief.

"No hesitating now," he reminded himself. "Simply a social call. I was passing by, visiting the Woods. They sent me over. Simple. Nothing to it."

The pipe had gone out. He slapped the bowl against his thigh and replaced it in the pocket of his jacket. He realized that the wind was sharper on the hilltop. His face was stinging. Nevertheless he managed to whistle, an unmelodious accumulation of sounds he usually concocted while attacking some arduous task. He was unaware at first that he had chosen his "working song." But his subconscious mind must have directed it. With all his determined cheer, that part of his mind which was ever on

the alert was keyed to a high pitch, ready.

A porch grew out at the back of the house. John had no choice but to go to it, following the only path. He went up the dozen steep steps, across the floor of an entry where paper cartons were stacked almost as high as his own head. The door before him was of wood, painted a dark brown, but the paint was almost worn away. John took a deep breath, and knocked twice. In the quiet of waiting that followed he shifted the basket forward in both his hands, commanded a pleasant—or what he meant to be a pleasant—expression, and strained his ears to hear some sound from within.

The place was as still as death. A minute passed, and another. There was no response to his knock.

He freed his right hand, lifted it to strike the door again and, in that instant, it opened inward. A boy stood in the dark entryway, a tall boy with a mop of hair so fair that it seemed almost white. He wore, over a battered-looking sweater and trousers too large, a long, white apron. There was a towel in his hand.

John realized that he was almost staring at the apron, the towel. He laughed shortly and looked into the boy's face. Dark, sullen eyes under heavy brows stared at him. A mouth like a thin line did not open to speak.

John said, "Hello—," and held up the basket. The

boy's eyes saw it with something like astonishment. "Mrs. Wood sent this over to you."

"Mrs. Wood—!" the boy repeated, in a surprisingly high voice. "Yes," John said, and nodded backward in the direction he had come. "She lives over there a ways. One of the neighbors. Maybe you're new here—?"

The boy shook his head. "I'm not new here. I know her." He was evidently puzzled. John did not know why, but he thought again of the little black dog. He had been waiting for someone else. Like this boy. But the little dog met him eagerly at first, hopefully. He was yearning to see a face he would welcome. It was different with this boy. There had been no welcome here. He was expecting to see someone he disliked very much when he had opened the door.

But his expression was rapidly lifting. It was honest surprise John saw, and heard in the high, hushed voice. "You—you came from the Woods' place?"

"That's right."

The boy seemed to try to grasp this information. John tried to help him. He said again, "She sent this stuff over to you. Thought maybe you could use some fresh eggs and butter."

"We can use it, I guess," the boy said, but not with any great enthusiasm. He looked past John's shoulder. "Did you—did you meet anybody when

"Mrs. Wood Sent This Over to You."

you came here?"

"Not a soul." There was an awkward pause. "Were you expecting somebody?"

"Well—," the boy hesitated. He looked fixedly into John's face, and both his hands grasped the towel. His fingers were large and extremely clean. There could be no doubt but that he had been washing dishes. Worrying the towel, the boy looked back over his shoulder toward the interior of the house. He was evidently at a loss how to proceed, wondering if he should take the proffered gift here at the door or whether he should invite the visitor inside.

But John wanted to get inside. He had to.

He said, "Maybe I'd better take this in the kitchen. I can't stay very long—."

The boy bit his lower lip. He turned sidewise, looking away at a part of the house John could not see, but presently the necessity of making a decision was no longer his concern. Footsteps sounded in the unseen interior and a husky voice called out sharply, "Dud! You there, Dud?"

"I'm here, Gramp. At the back door."

The footsteps came nearer, as though coming upward from a cellar.

"You—alone?"

The boy looked at John. He said, in the direction of the older man's voice, "No, Gramp. There's—a man here." He drew in his breath and added hastily,

keeping his tone quiet, "He says he's from the Woods'. They sent over some eggs."

John heard again the note of surprise. "From the Woods' place!" And the footsteps quickened, came nearer. The boy stepped aside and a smallish man stood before John. He may have been sixty or seventy years old, but the years rested lightly on his bristling white head. Even at that brief meeting, John sensed the man's terrific energy. His ruddy face, creased with fine lines, glowed from the wind and the sun, a tan so deep as to hold over the winter months. He had the look of a man who had once been active in athletics and who still kept in touch with sports, a man who had once driven himself and who now drove others. His nose was short, his eyes narrowed slits as he briefly, but thoroughly, gave John an all-seeing inspection. He muttered, "Umm," and drew a piece of waste from the back pocket of patched overalls. His hands, as he wiped them, left a sooty smudge.

John felt the word "Pop" coming to his tongue. This old gentleman, if the lines around his mouth would lift, would deserve the title. But the mouth was sober. John said, "You must be Mr. Oberg. The Woods mentioned—."

"I'm Bert Oberg," the old man said, and the boy came nearer. He nodded toward John. "Gramp, he says he didn't meet anybody on the way over."

The old man said again, "Umm," and eyed the basket. "Eggs, huhm?"

John added, "And some butter." He had a feeling that he would shove the two of them aside in another minute and walk into the house without an invitation. He was cold, and though they were dressed warmly, they must be, too.

Bert Oberg seemed to sense his thought. "You better come in. Get warm," he said. He patted the boy's shoulder, urging him ahead. "Finish those dishes, Dennis."

The boy flashed him a startled look. Perhaps it was surprise over the use of his formal name, or perhaps he was astonished that his grandfather had invited the man to enter. John did not know, or give the matter any particular thought. He was gratified in finally making his entrance.

They moved in single file, for the way ahead was narrow. The boy went first, turning to the left. Bert Oberg motioned John to follow. John did so and the old man closed the door and came after him.

John's first impression of the kitchen was of its height. John's eye traveled to reach the ceiling. There was an immense wood stove against one wall. Fire gleamed through the cracks around two of the lids, and an iron kettle simmering there gave off a fragrant, spicy odor. There were doors on either side of the stove, both closed. Along two walls were cup-

boards, a three-legged stool near by, a necessity when reaching the upper shelves. The sink was next, constructed of narrow, white tile. In the center of the room was a large, square table. It was without a cloth, the boards scrubbed white. Two windows were over near the door through which John had entered. He thought briefly that they were at the back of the house. A low table in front of the windows bore a cloth and a row of knives. One was detached from the rest, at the edge.

Bert Oberg had taken the basket and had placed it on the center square table. He was standing near it, waiting, watching John intently. The boy, Dud, held his towel still. He was standing near the sink, holding a plate from the dishes on the draining board. But there was an air of suspended animation about the lad. He made an ineffectual attempt to dry the plate, but he, too, was watching John—and waiting.

John came from his appraising look about the room to a realization of their attention. He laughed shortly, gestured with one hand. "This is some kitchen!" he said. "You two keep it up?"

Bert Oberg nodded. On a little shelf over the sink, a round clock ticked noisily, uncertainly, like a heart that was overworked. The ticking and the bubbling of the contents of the iron kettle were the only sounds in the room.

John felt suddenly as though a heavy weight had been placed upon his shoulders. On the surface, everything had gone as he had wished and planned. He had gained admission to Hawk's Nest. The gift from Mrs. Wood had brought him in. All he need do now was to question these two, for surely they could tell him in a moment if all were well with Lyman Nuhart and his granddaughter, Leetha. They were to be trusted. But, somehow, John felt at a loss for words.

It was the attitude of the old man and the boy—they were tense, wary. They seemed almost afraid to speak. The air was alive with the words they could say, that they wanted to say, and yet they waited, the old man standing near John's side, the boy over at the sink, daubing with his towel at the plate. It was as though some unseen foe were standing at their backs, prodding them with a deadly weapon. John felt that they wanted desperately to tell him something, to warn him of something, but dared not speak.

With an effort, he shrugged away his gloomy thoughts, forced himself to concentrate upon the necessity of accomplishing his mission with all due speed. But the feeling of stealth prevailed. He found himself saying, in an almost unnaturally loud tone, "If you'll take that stuff out of the basket, Oberg, I'll take it back to Mrs. Wood."

Bert Oberg said, "I'll take it out," and held out a hand. Dud understood the silent order and reached in the cupboard! He brought out a large bowl and placed it on the table. As the old man began to lift the eggs out, to put them into the bowl, John drew nearer. He said, almost in a whisper, "I'm a friend of Susan Parker's. She sent me—"

And then he saw the quick upward movement of the old man's head. His eyes gleamed with warning. A gnarled and still sooty hand gripped John's arm, more than a simple friendly gesture—it cautioned silence. Bert Oberg said, "How's she taking the winter? Puttering with her seed catalogs now. I'll bet. Mrs. Wood can make anything grow." He shook his head with tremendous appreciation, and held up one of the eggs. "Look at the size of that thing!" he said.

John followed his lead. "A whopper, isn't it?" he agreed, but he sounded flat in his own ears. Like a person in a dream, with a fixed smile he stood, watching the old hands take the eggs out, one by one. At last there came the butter, showing golden through wax paper.

Bert Oberg handed the empty basket to John. "You tell Mrs. Wood thank you for us. Too bad you're in such a hurry." For an instant, as he took the basket, John's eyes studied the face of Bert Oberg. The man seemed to be still smiling, his lips

were drawn slightly upward. He did not move his mouth, but said, in a low whisper between his teeth, the one word, "Sheriff!"

Then, lest he had been overheard, lest the small hissing word had reached listening ears, Bert Oberg coughed to cover it, and turned his head aside.

The boy, Dud, seemed to read this as an admonition to him to act in a more natural manner. He turned away from them, toward the sink, and went on with the business of drying the dishes.

John was standing at the table, and he measured the distance from there to the outer door. As quickly as possible, he knew he must cover it, make his exit, his escape. He must hurry to carry out Bert Oberg's urgent command. Help was needed here, needed at once.

He forced himself to thrust one arm through the basket, easily, and put his cap back on his head. It had been rolled into one of his jacket pockets and his fingers fumbled getting the flaps over his ears. But he thought he managed well enough. He said, "Yes, I have to be getting back. Great people, Theo and Frankie Wood." He moved a step away, and out of the corner of his eye he saw the door to the left of the stove. It was slowly opening.

Minutes were precious, but John found himself held to the spot. He watched the ever-widening crack, his eyes level, expecting to see someone stand-

ing there, but he saw nothing. No one appeared.

He felt the urgency in Bert Oberg, the command to go, to go quickly, and he moved a foot forward. In that instant he saw the movement on the floor inside the doorway. A hand was going along the carpet. It was a dark carpet, handwoven and threadbare. The hand, knotted and blue veined, seemed to grope upward. It found the woodwork, held there, then moved upward again. Some of the arm appeared, an arm in some heavy woolen stuff of a faded brown color. Then the movement became swifter. The hand reached the table where the knives were, where the one knife rested at the edge. John saw a woman's face and shoulders appear briefly. He knew that the woman was very old, that the eyes were staring. Then knife and hand disappeared into the dim room from which they had come.

John almost whirled to face Bert Oberg.

Had he seen what had happened? It appeared he had not. He was standing with his back to that dim door, facing another way, the way by which John had entered this room, the way he must go to leave it, and on Bert Oberg's face was a mixed expression, hard to read. But John knew hate when he saw it. And he knew fear, and hopelessness.

He followed the direction of the older man's fixed stare. There seemed to be no one at the door. Why, then, was Bert Oberg so shaken?

The crash, when it came, was so unexpected that John felt himself stiffen. He looked over toward the sink from whence the noise had come. Dud had dropped a glass. He was bending, his face averted, already gathering the fragments.

A laugh came, from where John did not know in that instant, and a man's voice, clear and distinct, yet smooth as a velvet purr: "You should be more careful, my boy."

CHAPTER FOUR

MASTER OR MAN?

Who should be more careful, John wondered. Was the unseen speaker addressing Dud, chiding him for breaking the glass? Or was this admonition directed to himself? It must be the boy, John thought, and yet there was an undercurrent flowing below the soft speech, a treacherous whirlpool not visible on the surface.

And, as yet, John had not seen the speaker, did not know where he was. He looked swiftly toward Bert Oberg. The old man was keeping his eyes on the back door. He seemed to be standing at a rigid attention. John had a feeling that Bert Oberg wanted to turn toward him, to communicate some silent message, but that he dared not shift his eyes.

John had little choice but to follow the older man's lead. He, too, watched the back door, and saw that it opened. From out of the dark entryway, the man came into the kitchen, a slender man, of medium height in a neat, brown business suit. There was nothing extraordinary about him. His features were rather finely cut, low brows over black eyes, a thin straight nose. His hair was jet black, straight,

untouched by gray. He was a man you might meet in almost any office and, meeting him soon after on the street, you might not remember him.

But this was not an office. This was Hawk's Nest, the great old house on the silent shores of lonely Fern Lake. This was winter, a shut-in time of cold and snow. The man who had entered did not fit the time nor the place. He seemed, to John, like an actor who had wandered on the wrong set.

But he appeared thoroughly at ease where he was. He came nearer, acknowledged John's presence with a fleeting smile. Dud had the pieces of glass in his hands and was rising from his knees. It may have been that the folds of the long apron impeded his movement, but it seemed that the boy had unusual difficulty in rising to his feet. He did not look up and his back was bent, as though he anticipated a blow.

The man looked toward him with a negligent compassion, then met John's waiting gaze.

He said, in the same cultured quiet tone, "I am Alfred Borton, Mr. Nuhart's secretary and companion." There was a pause of seconds. "You wished something?"

John felt awkward, and extremely young, and resented his feeling. Alfred Borton could be not many years older than himself. He managed to nod toward the empty basket on the table, the bowl of eggs.

"I just stopped by to bring a little present from Mrs. Wood," he said.

The man moved his head ever so slightly. "I see," he said, and appeared to be waiting. "You are a friend of the Woods?"

"Well—yes. My name's—Rick Hayford. I was passing, and Mrs. Wood asked me to stop here. She wanted to be remembered to you all."

Not so long ago, John had told himself that this would be simple, easy to do. In Frankie Wood's presence, it was. She would, naturally, send a gift to friends, eggs and butter, and a kindly greeting. But Frankie Wood and long, lean Theo were as remote as the stars in this high room. John's explanation, that he was "just passing by" sounded flat, anything but convincing. The man must be questioning this in his own mind, perhaps would voice his disbelief. But Alfred Borton surprised John. His explanation passed unchallenged.

"Very kind of Mrs. Wood," Alfred Borton said.

Dud had scooped the broken glass onto a piece of heavy paper. Holding it cupped in one hand, he started for the back door. John did not know why, but he looked away from the boy, to Alfred Borton. The man's face was a study. He was watching Dud as an animal trainer watches one of his pets attempting a difficult trick. He did not speak, but Dud, like a well-coached performer, knew when he must stop,

turn, and come back.

Alfred Borton breathed deeply. "That's right, my boy," he said. "Leave it there, under the sink." Dud looked away from him and for a fleeting instant, at his grandfather's face. The boy's lips moved, but he said nothing. There was a crashing clatter as he emptied the fragments in the container as Alfred Borton requested.

The secretary said to John, "In this cold weather, we only go out when it's absolutely necessary."

A dog growls sometimes, though hardly making a sound. You sense, rather than hear, the low rumble of fury. John heard, or sensed, such a rumble now in the throat of Bert Oberg, but before he could make a study of its cause, he realized that Alfred Borton was speaking to him. He said, "You need not hurry. Perhaps you would like to have a look around the place?"

"Why—yes," John said. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the light rumpled head of the boy, Dud, lifting swiftly. Dud did not want him to look around the house. He hated the secretary, and feared him. Bert Oberg shared his feeling. As for John himself, he was in a puzzled maze of thought about the man. What was the nature of the grip he exerted over the Nuhart household? Why was he so hated, so feared?

The answer would never be discovered in flight. In order to know what evil thing dwelt in the tim-

bered walls of Hawk's Nest, John must search about, see what he could see.

John met Bert Oberg's veiled glance. The old man did not want him here, any more than Dud did. They wanted him to hurry away, to get help.

John recalled Bert Oberg's frantic whisper, "Sheriff!" The old man was fully aware of the state of affairs here. He knew what was needed—the sheriff.

But, John argued with himself swiftly, now that his presence had been discovered, it was almost impossible to bolt for the door. Alfred Borton would know, then, that he had been warned, that he was suspicious. No, he had only one thing to do now, to appear completely at ease. He must keep up the appearance of a casual guest, allow himself to be conducted about the place, and as soon as it was convenient, to take his leave.

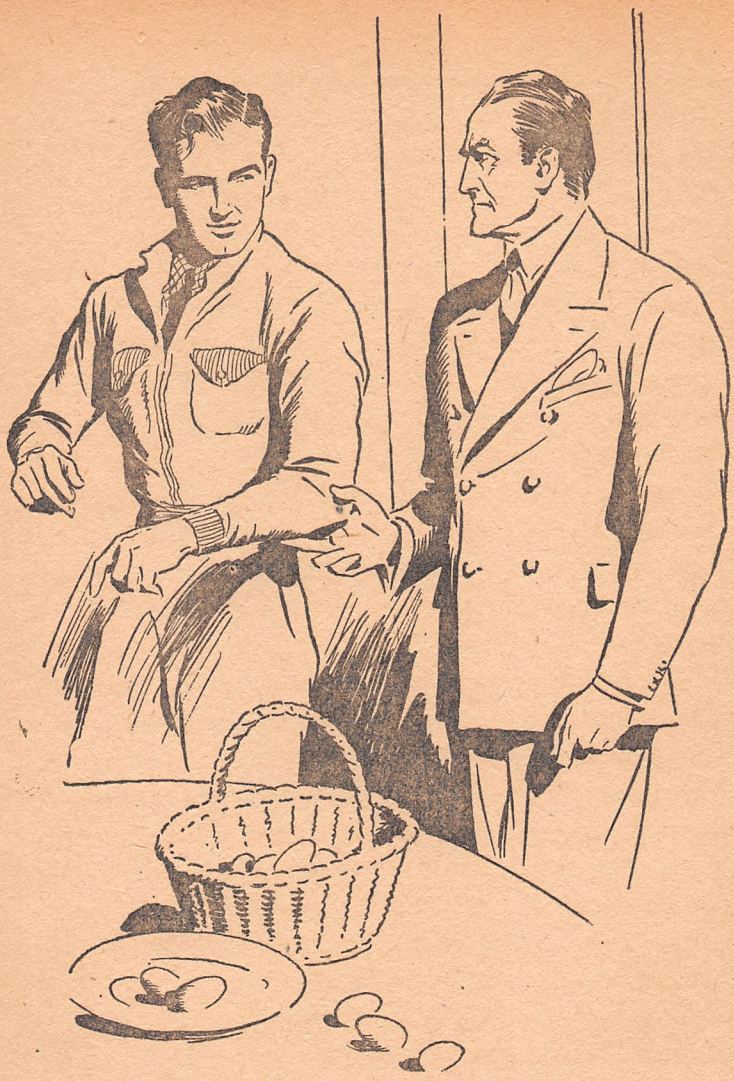
It seemed simple. As the word came to John's mind, it struck a note that had been sounded before. Simple. It seemed simple to come to Hawk's Nest, to be taken in. Would an exit be—easy?

A hand touched John's arm, and he gave a start. He realized that Alfred Borton must have spoken to him. The plain man was looking at him now with a sort of amused tolerance. He said, as though he were repeating himself, "If you will please follow me, Mr. Hayford?"

John said, "Oh—sure. I—I was thinking. I told Mrs. Wood I'd hurry back, but," he grinned and felt that he appeared natural, at ease, "it isn't every day I get an invitation to see a place like this."

"No," Alfred Borton smiled gently, "it isn't. Hawk's Nest is most interesting." He started toward the door at the right of the stove, moving back of Bert Oberg who was still at the table. Dud was busy at the sink, his back to them. He was wiping off the tiles, making very little noise. So the small sound in the dim doorway to the back of the room was clearly audible. John was nearest to that door now, and he turned. In a flood, he remembered the gnarled old hand that had groped toward the smaller table, the hand that had picked up the knife at the table's edge.

The sound came again, a small singsong of which no sense could be made. The door opened farther, and John saw an old woman standing there, facing him directly. Her eyes bored into his shoulders, it seemed, but she gave no sign of recognition. The singsong came again, and John thought of a child murmuring sleepily as it drowsed into slumber. There was a chair behind the woman, a chair with a white covering over the back. He could see her as she moved backward and seated herself, and he thought of the poem, "An old, old, old, old lady," for this woman must be nearly a hundred years old.



A Hand Touched John's Arm

White hair was cut short around her withered face in which only the eyes, pale blue and staring, seemed alive. She was making the mumbling sounds, and yet her fragile lips seemed not to move.

The chair was a rocker, facing John directly. It was a small chair, but the old woman was not cramped in it. She could not have been more than five feet tall. Her feet, encased in light-colored, heavy stockings and low, leather slippers, looked like the feet of a child, toeing in as she rocked herself gently.

And then, against the dull brown of her dress, John caught the flash of steel. The old woman had the knife, the knife he had seen her taking from the table. She was moving it in her hands. It seemed she was trying to smooth the nail of one knotted thumb with the blade.

It could have been only a few moments that John had stood there, looking at her, but it seemed an endless time. The man felt that he had come a long way to meet this moment, that destiny had planned it before time. It was impossible, and yet he felt that he had stood just so before, terrified for this old woman's safety, watching her rocking gently, scraping at her thumb with the knife. He heard his voice, "She's got a knife! Will she hurt herself?"

John was looking at Bert Oberg who was nearest to him, but he saw Alfred Borton coming forward. Anger clouded his face, anger and something else.

Disgust. He snarled at the old man, "You were told to keep that door closed!"

In what was almost a bound, Bert Oberg reached the dim doorway. His hand touched the knob of the door, closed it. With his back against the wooden frame, he faced the secretary. John thought Bert Oberg would scream defiance, but with an effort he held his peace, and Dud, crossing the floor like a cat, came to his grandfather's side.

Fury raged in the quiet kitchen, but John felt less concern for Alfred Borton, for Bert Oberg and Dud in that moment than he did for the old woman in the rocking chair. He said to the white-haired man who stood vigilantly at the door, "She'll hurt herself, won't she? That knife looked sharp. It's dark in there with the door closed. She—she can't see!"

Alfred Borton said, "It doesn't matter. She's blind." His voice was smooth again, under perfect control.

John said, deflated, "Oh."

Bert Oberg seemed to gain in stature. He was looking at John but he seemed to talk for the benefit of Alfred Borton. He said, "My mother is not only blind—she is deaf. And she troubles no one. She trims her fingernails with that knife, and never hurts herself."

John said again, "Oh," and, because it sounded feeble, added, "I see."

"Mr. Nuhart let me bring her here," Bert Oberg went on slowly. "He said she could stay here, as long as she lives."

Alfred Borton said, "Of course. She'll stay here—" he paused the fraction of a moment, "as long as she lives. But it might be considerate of the feelings of others to keep her removed as much as possible." He looked at Bert Oberg and it seemed to John that these two had forgotten his existence, that, indeed, he was out of this thing entirely. Even the boy, Dud, though he was standing at Bert Oberg's side, seemed to play no part in the affair. It was Alfred Borton and Bert Oberg: and the secretary, while he appeared quiet, firm, was battling with his will against that of the white-haired man. He said, "You understand, Oberg?"

Bert Oberg nodded slowly, never taking his eyes from the younger man's face. "I understand," he said.

Alfred Borton rubbed the palms of his hands together, long, slender fingers, well cared for. He gestured with a nod to John. "If you will come with me," he said, "I'll show you the house."

John said, "Oh—oh, sure." It did not sound enthusiastic. He added, "Quite old, isn't it?"

"Built about fifty years ago." The secretary had started toward the third door in the kitchen, the only door John had not seen open as yet, but he

paused, evidently making up his mind. He said, "No, we'll go around by the back way."

John followed him. He looked backward just once before leaving the room. Bert Oberg and Dud had scarcely moved. They were both looking at him. Dud's face was sullen, his eyes unreadable. But a message flashed without words from the white-haired old man. He told John, "Watch your step!" as plainly as though he had called out to him. John nodded and hurried after Alfred Borton.

They went again through the entry. John saw the back door through which he had come in. They moved beyond it, to the end of the hallway. A narrow flight of steps led upward from here and to the right was the entrance to a spacious hallway. Looking down it, John saw what he thought must be the front door of the house. It was of heavy glass, rising to a Gothic point at the top, set in timber that looked hand-hewn. Around the glass was iron scrollwork, and up from the bottom, to a height of about seven feet, were bars of the beaten iron. The whole thing was impressive enough, but to John in his present mood, there came the suggestion not so much of craftsmanship as that this door would not open easily. It marked the entrance to a prison.

He felt Alfred Borton's eye upon him and grasped for enthusiasm.

"Some door!"

"Isn't it." Alfred Borton's hands were in his pockets. Head on one side, he was regarding the entrance with the appreciation of an artist over his work, the work he knew to be his best. He sighed lightly, lingeringly. "I never tire of seeing that doorway."

It struck John forcibly that the man's attitude was that of a proud and satisfied owner, rather than a secretary, a servant in the employ of the master of the house. John thought of Bert Oberg, of Dud. They hated this man, feared him—but they obeyed him. How, then, did Lyman Nuhart fit into the picture? Where was he? And the girl, Leetha, Nuhart's granddaughter? It was for their safety that Susan Parker was concerned. To assure the woman of their well-being had been the reason for John's presence here. But thus far, no mention had been made of the master and the girl. Alfred Borton was doing the honors.

John felt a sudden wild wish to make for that grilled door, to tear it open, and bolt for the chill of the free winter air.

The impulse left him almost upon its quickening. In flight, he would not be keeping his promise to Susan Parker, to Mrs. Hayford and Sandy, nor to Rick, who would willingly be on this strange mission if it were possible. No. The thing to do was to keep up the appearance of ease, if anything, to show more enthusiasm, to keep his eyes open—but

not to consider leaving, not until he had seen for himself the true condition of things here.

But he already knew, from Bert Oberg's frantic whisper, that the blight of evil was on Hawk's Nest. Perhaps, even now, Lyman Nuhart and Leetha had come to serious harm. Precious minutes might be passing which would be better spent in facing this too-quiet man bluntly, demanding an explanation of him. John's fingers itched to grasp him by the shoulders, to force him to speak. Why did Bert Oberg and Dud cringe before him? And that old woman, Bert Oberg's mother? Why did Alfred Borton demand that she be kept out of sight, hidden in the dim room off the kitchen?

John had been staring at the iron grating. It seemed that the bars moved, like clawing fingers, like snakes twining. He blinked his eyes to clear the illusion. One hand went to his head, smoothing the dark thick hair, trying to smooth his flying thoughts. Alfred Borton was not the only actor who had stumbled upon the wrong set. He, John Payne, was the victim of an error. He had been misdirected, given no clue as to his character. This was a nightmare stage where he could only grope for his lines, lines he had never studied.

When Alfred Borton placed a hand on his arm, John gave a start.

"This way," the man said smoothly, propelling

John to the right where a heavily-paneled door cut into the dark wood of the hallway. He opened the door. "We call this the lounge. If you will follow me—?"

John said, "Certainly," and they came into the room, a place almost like some chapel in structure, rising in the same Gothic sweep to a ceiling. Where it narrowed, timbers crossed the length of the room. Against one wall was a fireplace, yawning black behind one immense log that spluttered feebly. On either side of the fireplace were bookcases under high, pointed windows. Alfred Borton pointed beyond, to where a narrow doorway cut in.

"The study," he said, and paused, as though he were listening. Abruptly, his manner changed. He pointed to the farther wall, where a broad leather couch stood below three tall windows. "You can see the lake from there," he said hastily. "A beautiful view. Excuse me a moment, please."

He went through the narrow door, disappearing. John thought he heard a metallic murmuring sound, but could not be certain. He shrugged his shoulders and looked toward the windows. They must be at the front of the house. He might as well look around as much as possible. The more he looked about him, the more he might be able to see. He moved forward, looking about the room as he moved. There was a magnificent grand piano, several

deep leather chairs. John did not study the room in detail. His principal concern was to reach the front window, and he moved across the heavy oriental rug swiftly, and as quietly as the heavy boots would permit. The place seemed to suggest quiet, caution. He was conscious again of weight, pressing down, of eyes watching him.

The view from the windows *was* beautiful. The lake lay below. John looked down at it, down over the triple walls, the iron railing. The steps were there beside it, but the snow was in mounds over them, untouched by human foot. Only the prints of birds were there and a scattering of identations which might have been made by a flighty squirrel. It was quite evident that for many weeks the front entrance of Hawk's Nest had not been in use.

John turned from the window. The door to the study was still closed. His eye came back and he looked through the archway that led back to the hall. He went through the arch and came nearer to the iron-grilled entrance. He saw the stairway now, with one great, carved post standing guard. Directly ahead was the dining hall and John felt himself being drawn toward it. He had walked in a semi circle since leaving the kitchen. He felt certain that the dining room must lead again to the spot where he had left Bert Oberg and Dud—if not directly to the kitchen, at least to some intervening pantry. It might

be a guarded place where he could call out to Bert Oberg, ask him to see if the back door were clear. Then he could bolt for it, get help. There would be time later to inquire why it was needed. John knew with a blinding intensity that he must hurry away, that not another second must be lost.

The dining room was smaller than one would expect it to be in a place of this size. Over a low sideboard was a tapestry woven in a Tree of Life design. Cut into one corner was a fireplace, fashioned in blue and white tiles, each one a distinct picture. John saw them fleetingly, and the long table with its waiting, empty chairs. What he wanted was the door that would lead him back to Bert Oberg and the boy, Dud. And then that back door that would bring him out to the path in the snow, to the open road.

For John had found himself in the part he meant to play. He was not merely a foil for Alfred Borton, a colorless extra to be pushed about by the heavy lead. No. He was the fellow who carried the ball. No matter what the interference might be, he must take the initiative, he must go now, at once. He could not understand why he had waited this long, allowed such a waste of time.

But John never reached the intervening door alone. He heard a soft laugh behind him and turned. Alfred Borton was standing in the archway leading to the dining hall. "Wait a minute," he called

out, tolerantly, amused. "You might get lost."

"I don't think so," John said, flatly. "This is the way to the kitchen, isn't it?"

"Yes. But I haven't shown you the dining hall." Alfred Borton's eyes caressed the tapestry, the fireplace. "Those old tiles there are most interesting."

"Sorry. I'll have to be on my way." John started again for the door.

"Better wait," Alfred Borton said, and John turned to him. He saw the gleam of the revolver in the man's hand. There were windows here in the dining room, too, tall windows that looked out upon the front of the place. The sun slanted in, glinting against the steel.

John stood still, looking at the gun, then into the man's face. He would remember it now, for Alfred Borton was no longer the quiet business man. He was the lawbreaker incarnate, the criminal, ruthless, crafty, hard as granite.

John said, "Aren't you making a mistake?"

The man came nearer. He shook his head. "I think not," he said, and the veneer of courtesy with which he cloaked the words made him the more venomous. He motioned with the weapon for John to come back. John shrugged and moved toward him.

Alfred Borton sighed. He put the hand that held the gun into his coat pocket, but the outline of both,

the jutting nose of the gun and the sharp knuckles, was clearly visible in the dark cloth. "Now," he said, "we'll have a look around here. That fireplace, as I said, is most interesting. If you'll look closely, you'll see that various scenes from the Bible are depicted there."

John kept his eyes on the secretary's bland face. He said nothing, clamping his teeth together until his jaw ached. Alfred Borton seemed unaware of the rage that consumed his unwilling guest. He seemed engrossed in admiration of the blue and white tiles, but kept himself in such a position that John was a sure target should he prove unruly.

"There's Noah," he pointed with his free hand, "adrift, completely at sea. Here we have the Prodigal Son returning home. And this, I believe, is David with his coat of many colors. His brothers regarded him as a nuisance because he was given special privileges." Alfred Borton paused, frowning thoughtfully. "I believe it was David, wasn't it? He was put into a pit—."

"I think not," John matched him, gravely considering the matter. "It seems to me it was Joseph."

"You're right," Alfred Borton seemed pleased. "Ever since I first saw these tiles, I tried to remember that name. It was Joseph. Joseph and his coat of many colors. His father wasn't quite fair, you know. Everything should have been even, the same for one

and all."

John frowned and looked out the window nearest to him. He could see the first stone wall, the wall that guarded the main terrace. "As I recall," he said slowly, "his brothers were a bunch of sneak thieves, not deserving an even break."

There was a small silence, then Alfred Borton laughed. "We'll have to go into this more deeply—later on." He pretended not to see the sudden lift of John's dark brows, as he nodded again toward the fireplace. "It was built by a Dutchman. You see, the last three rows along the sides here are Holland scenes. Not exactly the work of a finished artist, but bright and colorful."

John continued to look at him quietly. He was wondering why the man was holding him here, talking on about the tiles. It was as though he were waiting for something, sparring for time. And, later on, they would go into this matter more deeply. Later on. That must mean that he was to be detained. Why? Had Alfred Borton guessed that he had been warned? Had he heard Bert Oberg's whispered plea for help?

John decided to try to fall back into the role of guest. If Alfred Borton were showing a guest about, and suddenly produced a gun, that guest would be outraged, tremendously surprised. Well, it was too late now to show surprise, however John might reas-

onably demand an explanation. He said, "I don't know what your idea is, Mr. Borton, but I'd like to know why you're pointing that gun at me."

"I'll tell you," the answer was prompt. "It doesn't suit my purpose to have you leave right now. You came here under a false pretense, at your own risk. You'll have to take the consequences, Mr.—John Lane."

John's head spun. "False pretenses," and "your own risk," rang in his ears, so that at the moment, the implication of a wrong name did not fully penetrate. But he had been discovered as an interloper, a spy, perhaps, to Alfred Borton's way of twisted thinking, and he must "take the consequences." He looked dully, unseeingly, at the amused face of his captor, and past him toward the tiles again. One of the small pictures came into focus, the picture of Joseph, with his envious brothers gathered about him and at his feet the open, yawning mouth of the pit.

CHAPTER FIVE

NO ESCAPE

John floundered in a quagmire of indecision. Alfred Borton was watching him like an amused cat pawing a half-alive mouse, waiting for some token of his discomfiture. But John was too shaken to give the man any satisfaction.

Was this, he wondered, the final fadeout? The end of the part he was to play in the drama of Hawk's Nest? Just when it seemed he had a grip on his character?

With an effort, he gathered his wits, marshalled his thoughts.

The secretary knew him to be an enemy, an interloper. Otherwise, he would not have that hand in his pocket, the hand that was gripping the upthrust weapon. But that name, *John Lane?* How had he arrived at that?

Somewhere, John told himself, Alfred Borton had heard his name mentioned—hastily, no doubt, so that he did not get it straight. It could have been only one way, over the telephone, when Sandy had called back to say that he would come. But Sandy had not called Hawk's Nest. The telephone had

been out of order here. She had called the Woods' home. She had told *them* that John Payne was coming.

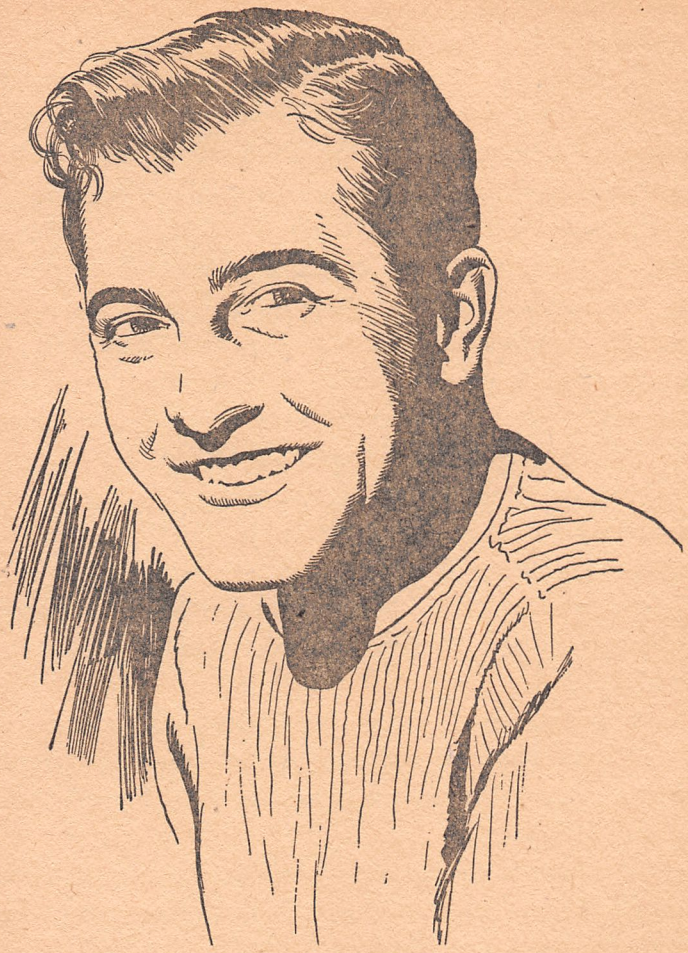
How had Alfred Borton known of that call? The talons of the hawk, John reflected grimly, were sharp and long!

He realized that his captor was speaking.

"You are surprised, aren't you, Mr. Lane?" he said graciously, and John yearned to slap the smile from his lying lips. "Perhaps I can enlighten you—somewhat. If you will please come with me? We'll go over there to the stairway seat. We can talk privately, and I will be near the study." He glanced across the hallway, toward the narrow door near the great fireplace. He said, confidingly, "I always keep near the study."

John heard half of what the man was saying. There was a roaring in his head, a surging fury, directed mainly at himself. Why had he let the man make this pretense of showing him the place? Why had he delayed so long? Bert Oberg had given him the word, the danger signal. That was all he needed. He should have gone, then, before this man intruded. Now it was too late . . . . or was it?

John squared his shoulders. There was no use delving into the might-have-beens. That unseen trigger had not yet been pulled against him. There was still life, and while there was life, he could hope.



John Smiled Despite His Concern

And he could fight!

He heard Alfred Borton purr, "This way, please."

He let John walk a step ahead and he followed. They passed out of the dining room and into the hallway. The great post was there at the foot of the curving stairs and near it a narrow, red-cushioned seat. John had not particularly noticed it before. Alfred Borton nodded. It was a command for John to seat himself, and he did so. The man with the gun in his pocket did likewise, and leaned back against the lower stair-rail, crossing one knee over the other. Had it not been for the concealed weapon, he would have been the picture of comradely ease.

John gave him a careful, listening attention. Arms folded across his chest, he waited. Alfred Borton said, "A telephone in the country is a fascinating thing, Mr. Lane. It is unnatural not to eavesdrop."

John nodded. "I see. You overheard a telephone call?"

"Yes—and no. Let it be said that a call was overheard. We knew of your coming. When you arrived at the station this morning, we saw you. Theo Wood was a little late."

John pursed his lips. With some difficulty, he kept his voice level, matter-of-fact. "Very interesting," he said, giving Alfred Borton a word he fancied. "But I understood the telephone here is out of order."

"Oh, yes. Yes, indeed. That happened late last

night, when Miss Shepley tried to put in a call. The wire, it seems, was severed."

"You don't say!"

"Unfortunate, wasn't it?"

John was tiring of unreality. With a burst of unleashed energy, he clamped the boots down on the thick rug, almost leaped to his feet.

"Let's play it straight," he suggested. "Why are we wasting time like this?"

"Wasting time?" Alfred Borton was incredulous. "But we aren't. Please sit down, Mr. Lane. I'll try to be more direct."

John glared down at the cool face, stifled the desire to leap at the thin, pale throat, and brusquely seated himself again.

Alfred Borton applauded, "That's better. Much better. If you do as you are told, Mr. Lane, no harm will come to you "

"How about Mr. Nuhart?" John blurted. "And Leetha? Has any harm come to them?"

The man shook his head. "No. Not yet. Except perhaps, they may be a trifle bored."

"Bored?"

Alfred Borton shrugged. "Lonely, if you will. It has been necessary to detain them in their quarters on the third floor. They had been given the run of the house, but after last night, when Miss Shepley contrived to reach the telephone—" he paused,

shrugged again, and brightened. "But we have renewed our vigilance. There will be no repetition—no escape."

John let that thought whirl around in his head for a moment. It was not gratifying.

"What I can't understand," he said sharply, "is why you let me come here. I'll be missed, you know. The Woods know I'm here—and several others."

Alfred Borton smiled. "I'll worry about them," he said. He was looking directly at John, but his thoughts were traveling away, in another direction. He said, as though thinking aloud, "If I had known how short the time would be, I would have retained Mrs. Parker. It might have spared us this added confusion. Still, she was becoming a nuisance." He seemed to see John again. "She was worried about conditions here, wasn't she?"

"Very," John promptly agreed. "Her friends suggested getting in touch with the sheriff. But she preferred not. Still, if I don't come back, you might find yourself in a bad position, Mr. Borton."

"You mean they'll send investigators?"

"Yes," John gritted. "That's what I mean."

The man frowned thoughtfully. "I think not," he said. "But, after all, that's my concern. Now, as for you, if you will do as you are told, no harm will come to you."

"I see. What are you telling me to do?"

"For the moment, nothing. But later on, perhaps, we can use you. I will let you know."

John's lip curled. He said, "Thanks." Alfred Borton appeared not to hear. "You may consider yourself a part of the household, but you will remain on this first floor unless you receive orders to go elsewhere. You will share Oberg's quarters."

At the mention of Bert Oberg's name, a ray of light shone through the murky haze. Bert Oberg was bed rock in a crazy sea of uncertainty. If he would share quarters with the man, he would be given ample opportunity to question him, discover something of the blight that lay on this pile of stone and timber.

Alfred Borton was measuring him, studying him as he rose. He motioned for John to get up, and he did so. Alfred Borton said, "I have work to do. Go through the dining hall, to the swinging door." A smile lurked around his mouth. "As you were going before," he purred, "when I interrupted you. Go through the pantry to the kitchen. Undoubtedly Oberg is there now."

Undoubtedly, John thought. There was no escape for him either, or for the boy, Dud. They were trapped, too, prisoners.

Even while he spoke, John knew it was foolish, useless, but the words snapped out of him, unbidden. His eye ignored the movement in Alfred Bor-

ton's right pocket, glared into the white face. "Have you heard the one about the best laugh?" he said. "It goes to the fellow who laughs last."

A muscle twitched in Alfred Borton's jaw. Lines appeared around his mouth, making him look suddenly years older. He said, slowly, "But lips sealed in death cannot laugh, Mr. Lane, best or last." He took a backward step, motioned toward the dining hall. "If you will go now, please," he said.

John shrugged. Without another word, he strode past the secretary, into the dining hall. There was a prickling sensation at the base of his neck and his feet in the high boots felt numb. Lips sealed in death—! Suppose the fellow were to pull the trigger at his back?

Five steps, he counted unconsciously, six, seven—! And then he heard the crash and fear mounted high in his throat. He whirled, expecting to see the gloating face, but saw only a blank wall where the entrance to the dining hall had been. There must have been doors there, doors which came together. It was that sound John had heard. He heard himself sigh, a mixture of a groan and sharp breath. Turning, he slammed his hand against the swinging door.

The place where he found himself was not the kitchen, but another room, long and narrow and for a moment John could not see distinctly. The place seemed windowless. As his eyes became ac-

customed to the half-light, he saw that the room led far to the right. There was a door there, the upper part of it of glass. A dark shade was pulled down over it.

Oberg's sleeping quarters, John guessed. He might have been tempted to look there first, but ahead of him he made out the door to the kitchen. He heard Bert Oberg's voice and hesitated no longer.

As he entered the large room, he saw no one, but the old man's voice, gently soothing, was coming from the dim room off the kitchen. There was that other voice, whimpering, muffled, the voice of the little old lady.

John went past the great stove and felt the glow of it against him. He came nearer to the voices and would have called out, but Bert Oberg appeared. He nodded to John, acknowledging his presence, and paused in the doorway, looking back. He seemed to be satisfying himself that his mother was all right. Then he came to John's side. The two looked at each other for a long moment, a penetrating question from Bert Oberg, and the answer from John. Yes, he had had his little talk with Borton.

John said, and the flat quality of his own voice surprised him, "I am spending a little time here with you, Oberg. Sharing your bunk with you. Want to show me around?"

Bert Oberg was eager to leave the kitchen, to go to a place where they might talk more freely. He said, "Why—yes. Yes, Mr. Rick. I'll be glad to."

He started forward, but John's hand was on his arm. "Mr. Borton has found out that I am not Rick Hayford," he said. "He has called me John Lane. Call me John, will you, Oberg?"

Bert Oberg frowned up at him. John had surprised him. The old man was wondering why he had said that, even if it were true. John could not tell him, "In case the news were to leak out that a John Lane had come here from the Woods' place. In case someone who really knew who he was should hear the name, wrongly, and so become suspicious. In case, in some small way, it might be a clue to the investigation of Hawk's Nest!" John could not put it into words—indeed, the thought was not coherent in his own mind. But he knew that they must snatch at straws, any straw, however slender. Or be sucked into the whirlpool!

The old man said, "Very well, John." He glanced again into the dim room, and the set look went out of his face. The lines softened about his eyes, his mouth. He looked toward John and motioned with one finger. John stepped forward gingerly and looked in over the old man's shoulder.

Bert Oberg whispered fondly, "Old Gran's cleaning house."

John saw her on the floor, on her hands and knees. She was moving slowly, reaching with exploring fingers for little bits of string, shredded fragments of cloth which were scattered here and there over the woven rug. John said, softly, "I thought she was your mother, you said?"

"She is. Oh, you mean because I called her Old Gran?"

John nodded.

"That was what she wanted us to call her—before she lost her hearing. I have a sister who's a grandmother, so she's a great-grandmother." The smile grew wider. "She wouldn't stand for that. So—it's still Old Gran." He motioned. "Will you look at her now? She doesn't miss a thing. Keeps this room neat as a pin."

The room was neat and, John saw to his surprise, it was by no means small. There were two beds, a table between them. There was a large maple dresser with a round mirror over it. Then, immediately before the door was Gran, the rocking chair, a small table. Close to the wall was a sort of a clothespress, part wardrobe and the rest comprised of small drawers. Bert Oberg stepped in quickly and opened the door of the press. A neat row of dresses hung there. John caught the sheen of black silk, a blue flowered affair with a lace collar.

"She won't wear 'em, though," Bert Oberg sighed.

"She likes that brown dress she's got on." He nodded over to the farther bed. "When Mrs. Parker was here, she got Old Gran to spruce up. But now, she does just about as she pleases."

"I think she looks okay," John said, and struggled with a divided attention. He was alert to everything Bert Oberg was saying, and yet it was with some difficulty he kept himself from lifting the little old lady to her feet. Now and then her sightless eyes, startlingly clear, would gaze upward, and it seemed to John that she must see him, must resent his intrusion. But then she would go on again, searching for the infinitesimal clutter on the rug.

Bert Oberg was opening the drawers of the other side of the press. There were small stacks of white linens, folded garments, a box of hairpins. "She keeps this up herself," the man said proudly.

John said, "It seems unbelievable. It seems as though she must be able to see."

Bert Oberg closed the bottom drawer, came carefully to John's side, but the fingers of the gnarled hand touched his shoe before he passed. Old Gran whimpered and placed a hand on the arm of her rocking chair. She talked a muted singsong as she stood up and turned around, going without hesitation to the press. She opened the door and put a hand inside. John thought he heard her say, "Moved my black," and found that was exactly what she had

said.

Old Bert grinned. "She's scolding me. She knows I was in there, and she doesn't like it." He went to his mother, put an arm about her and led her back to the rocker. There he patted her hands, smoothed back the hair from her lined forehead. He said, looking up at John, 'She said 'Stranger.' Did you catch it? She knows when somebody strange is around."

"Does she?"

"You bet. Oh, she's smart. She said to me this morning, 'It's three days since Susan went away,' and that's what it is."

Silence settled, broken only by the murmuring of Old Gran. She knew that a stranger was here, but Bert was here, too. All was well.

But the mention of Susan Parker's name had brought the two men away from the temporary peace of this small haven, back to the realization of the task at hand. John thought of time, of precious moments to be hoarded, and Bert Oberg must have had much the same thought. John was in the doorway, and the old man came to stand beside him. He said nothing, but placed his hand on John's arm.

John knew the old man was going to show him to their joint quarters, but he was reluctant to leave Old Gran. He recalled the way Alfred Borton had snarled at her, had demanded that the door of this room remain closed.

Bert Oberg sensed his thought. He said, "She'll be all right, Mr.—John. He went to the study now, didn't he?"

"I believe so. But—."

"It's all right. We don't have far to go. Did you see the room at the end of the pantry?"

"The pantry?" John looked toward the narrow, dark place where he entered. "Oh, you mean in there?"

"In there."

"I saw the door. That the place?"

"That's it. We can hear her if she calls—or if anybody comes in."

John looked about. "Where's Dud?"

In the face of disaster, Bert Oberg could retain some of his abounding humor. A twinkle appeared in his old eyes. He said, "In the cellar—washing."

"Washing—?" John blurted. "Washing what?"

"Clothes. Sheets mostly. You know how to run a washing machine?"

John saw that he was serious. "Well—I can't say that I do. But I could learn."

"We'll see," Bert Oberg nodded. A sigh came from the depths of his being. "Susan Parker left us in a fix all right, all right."

They were near the stove, between it and the center table. Bert Oberg seemed to become aware of the kettle. He opened a drawer in the table. John

saw that there were some long handled forks in it, a scattering of kitchen gadgets, jar covers, several rolls of string. Bert Oberg took one of the long forks. Lifting the lid of the kettle, he let out the flood of steam, then prodded the contents. "Coming along," he said, and shut down the lid again.

"Smells good," John said. "Stew—?"

"Stew." Bert Oberg put the fork on the table. His eyes shot with speculation to John's face. John guessed what was in his mind.

"Now, don't ask me if I can cook," he warned.

Bert Oberg said plaintively, "Somebody's got to keep the home fires burning."

John put a hand on the old man's shoulder. It was a gesture inspired by the thought, "You're doing it, Oberg, against terrific odds." But in the last ten minutes or so, from the time John had come in here, the tension had somehow lessened. It might have been the atmosphere of the kitchen, its spicy, steamy warmth. It might have been the quiet and peace that seemed to spread from the dim room where Old Gran lived in eternal darkness and silence. It might have been simply because they were together, two men, united in a common bond of friendship and wordless trust. The claws of the hawk were duller here.

Then they heard the small scraping sound. They both came, abruptly, to a lightning appreciation of

the present. John's hand was still on Bert Oberg's shoulder and he felt the old man start even as he himself snapped to attention. He said, scarcely above a whisper, "Oberg, what's that noise? Where's it coming from?"

As he spoke, his eyes were drawn toward the cupboards near the sink. The sound seemed to come from there.

Bert Oberg said, "The chute!" He looked up at John, jerked his head. John followed as he went toward the cupboards. He bent slightly, thrust his hand in against a portion of the wall John had not seen before from where he had been standing. But he saw now that there was a small door there. The door to a clothes chute.

The old man's fingers opened it, and the scraping sound became more noticeable. Bert Oberg said, pointing, "Look!"

John bent to see upward into the opening Dangling from the end of a string was a rolled-up piece of paper. It was weighted with a fingernail file. That was what they had heard, the file scraping against the walls of the chute.

Bert Oberg whispered hoarsely, "Miss Leetha!" He glanced once over his shoulder to see if the back door had opened, if anyone had come stealing in to watch. Then, with a pounce, he grabbed the paper, tore the string.

CHAPTER SIX

IRON WORK

John was intensely eager to know the contents of the note, but it seemed his duty to stand guard in the long moment that followed. While Bert Oberg unrolled the paper, thrust the file into his overalls' pocket, John stood facing the back door. If the enemy were to appear, it seemed most likely it would be from that direction. He heard the old man mutter, and then came the crackling of the paper as Bert Oberg crushed it in his hand. He glanced about, toward the back door which John had been watching, toward the other door, the one leading to the pantry. Then he made a dash for the stove. The foremost lid came open, and the note was thrust inside. John saw the spit of the flame as it rose, and then Bert Oberg clamped the lid in place again. He looked across the room at John, jerking his head in the direction of the pantry. John followed him as he went through the door.

They passed the length of the long, dark room without a sound. Bert Oberg opened the door with the shade, and light came flooding through. Again John followed and found himself in what might have

been a sleeping porch. There was a chaste line of beds, three of them against one wall, a plain, oaken chest of drawers. Windows along one side were painted in jewels with the frost. The sun shining through was dazzling. Near the door was a small stove, round-bellied and giving off tremendous heat. A kettle of water pushed back near the pipe was nearing the boiling point.

John saw the place fleetingly, but in spite of his eagerness to hear what Bert Oberg would tell him, he felt a surge of approval for the old man and the boy, Dud. They kept things shipshape.

Bert Oberg lost little time. He motioned to one of the beds and John seated himself. The old man sat on one adjoining, facing John.

"That note was from Miss Leetha," he said swiftly. "She says to hurry. There's two more in the Hill House."

It made little sense to John and he must have looked blank. Out of his own knowledge and perturbation, Bert Oberg recalled John's freshness, ignorance of Hawk's Nest. He explained in a rush, "Hill House is back there," pointing toward the rear of the house. "You can't see it from here, or from the way you came. It's just below the next hill. It belongs to the Nest here. In fact, Dud and I used to stay there in the summer."

John said, "I see," and waited. What did the girl

Bert Oberg Lost Little Time

mean by "two more," he wondered.

"*They've* been staying there," Bert Oberg went on. "I've seen two of them, the big blond fellow and the dried-up dark one. He's the one took a shot at Dud."

"Took a shot—!" John exploded.

Bert Oberg's mouth tightened. "When Dud was going out to the back to dump some potato peels. It slipped his mind that Mr. Borton said not to go out."

"Was he hurt—?"

"No. But I was mightly glad his sweater was loose. Cut through the arm."

There was much to learn, so much, but worry for the boy jabbed uppermost in John's thought. "You think he's all right down there, Oberg?"

"You mean, in the cellar?"

"Yes. I think we ought to stick together."

"Maybe you're right. But I didn't think they'd —!" He broke off, rose to his feet. "So long as we stayed here, didn't try to leave, Mr. Borton said there'd be no trouble."

"I wouldn't trust him."

"No." Bert Oberg ran a worn hand over his white mop of hair. "Seemed I couldn't think very straight," he said. "Been pretty mixed up around here." He moved toward the door, paused. "I'm mighty glad you're here, son," he said, and then disappeared.

John sat for a moment studying the door with the dark shade. Then, rising, he turned to face the row of windows. The front door offered no hope of an exit, nor, surely, did the back door. But there must be a side entrance, and there were these windows. A dark twining of black showed here and there through the frost and at first John thought it to be the shadows of the bare twigs on near-by trees. But the twigs would not be so clearly defined, in such a regular scrolling pattern. Nature was more haphazard.

He went nearer to the windows, and knew that the black lines were of slender iron, around the windows, each and every one. The space that was free, in the center, was not large enough to admit a small child. To the left of the room, at the back of the bursting little stove, was a door, partly curtained. John thrust aside the drapery. He found that what had been the passage leading to the side entrance was now a clothes closet, and behind the clothing, he caught sight of the door which must lead to the driveway at the left of the house. That door was bolted beyond all hope of opening.

John's frail hope that the guards were stationed in the Hill House at the back, unable to watch this portion of the place, died before it came to a bud, but his being near the driveway reminded him of

the iron hawk. This room must be right off the drive. Perhaps he could see the iron figure from here.

He went again to the windows, peering through the small openings in the encrusted frost. At length he was frugally rewarded. He caught a glimpse of the hawk, a good ten feet above his head. He could see one of the wings, the outthrust beak. The whip was there, coiling over the archway. Vines in the summer must flourish green and luxurious. But now their dried skeletons were clinging to the stone, worried in the wind. It was as though they were fighting to be free, away from the archway, away from the claws of the great iron hawk.

John drew back, chilled in spite of the heat from the stove. He heard the door open and turned to see Bert Oberg coming in. John's eyes were expectant as he waited.

"He's all right," Bert Oberg said breathlessly, as though he had hurried. "I told him to stay in the kitchen. He's cleaning vegetables."

"That's better. We'll be near each other—in case." John glanced toward the windows. "I see they've got iron work around them," he said.

"Around the whole house, every window—and every door except the back door."

John said, ruefully, "Nice prison."

"Seems so, doesn't it? But this was built for a sum-

mer place. The one built it figured it'd be safe—so no one could break in when it was empty."

"He succeeded all right." John watched the old man take a red bandanna from one of his pockets and wipe his forehead. When he came back to his place on the bed, John seated himself as he was before. He said, "Oberg, what's it all about? Who is this Borton? What's going on here anyway?"

"I wish I could answer you, son. But I don't know." The white head shook. "I don't know."

"But how did he happen to come here in the first place?"

"Oh." Oberg kept the handkerchief in one hand. He frowned at the red cloth, jammed it back in his pocket. "Well, John, he came here about two years ago. Mr. Nuhart hired him."

"To be his secretary?"

"That's what he said. But I know better. He was supposed to be a kind of guard."

"A guard—!" John exploded. "You mean, Borton was to guard Mr. Nuhart?"

"That was the idea. I remember the day he came. He wasn't so high and mighty then. He trailed Mr. Nuhart around like a pup. It was, 'Yes, sir,' and 'No, sir,'—as polite as you please."

"But why," John frowned, "why did Mr. Nuhart want a guard, Oberg?"

"Because he was afraid, that's why. It was some-

thing that happened between him and his partner, Reid Morrow. Their business was bringing stuff in, expensive stuff. I think you call it importing."

John said, "I see," and waited. Bert Oberg's eyes strayed to the window where John had caught the glimpse of the iron hawk. He said, "Perhaps you noticed that hawk there, sitting on the whip."

"Yes, I did."

"That wasn't always there. It was something they got when they were in business together. They put it up there because it was supposed to bring them good luck. Mr. Nuhart said he was sharp as a hawk and Mr. Morrow said he was smart as a whip. It was a kind of a joke they had. You see, they used to come up here together in the summer." The old man sighed. "But I don't see that it brought any good luck. About five years ago they had this trouble, and Mr. Nuhart's acted queer ever since, as though he were afraid of something."

John said, "I see." It might have bearing on the solution of the tangled problem—it probably did. But that Alfred Borton, who had assumed the management of Hawk's Nest, should have been hired in the capacity of a secretary did not make sense. John wanted to hear the story, all of it, quickly and clearly. He prodded, "You say Mr. Nuhart hired Borton?"

"Yes, he did. And, like I said, at first he was fine.

It was only about six months ago that he changed. Yes," Bert Oberg paused, thinking back, "about six months. It was after that Mr. Havill came to see him."

"Who was he?"

Light flamed in the old eyes. "He was a devil in human form, if you ask me! A fat, soft-looking fellow, with eyes like a fish. Mr. Nuhart was out walking with Miss Leetha, and the two of them—Borton and Havill—went into the study. What they talked about, I don't know, but Mr. Borton changed after that. He started going into the village. Once I was in getting supplies and I saw him coming out of old Doffer's office. Doffer owns the county paper. I caught him telephoning a couple of times, too. I couldn't catch what he said, but he'd come away from the phone looking like a cat that's swallowed a mouse."

"But didn't Mr. Nuhart notice the change, Oberg?"

"He must've. But he didn't do anything about it. Kept indoors most of the time, and never went so far as the lake when he did go out. Then, when Miss Leetha came home from school for the holidays, he kept her here. It seemed he was afraid something was going to happen to him, and her, too." A troubled sigh came from the old pursed lips. "It doesn't make sense," Bert Oberg said heavily, "but that's

the way it was."

The kettle on the round stove could endure no more heat, and burst forth in a stream of vapor. John looked over at it, and caught a sound of movement in the kitchen. A dish being placed in the sink, water running. Satisfactory, domestic sounds. Dud was busy. All was well with him and Old Gran.

John said, suddenly, "How long have you been here, Oberg?"

"How long? Ten years next month. And I remember it as though it were yesterday. I brought Miss Leetha, you know."

"Yes—?"

"I used to work for her dad, Mr. Shepley. They had a big place, sheep, horses—always something going on. Mrs. Shepley was the laughing kind, and pretty—!" He paused a moment, in happy recollection. "She was Mr. Nuhart's daughter, his only child. Didn't look at all like him; he's not what you'd call handsome." Bert Oberg looked away, toward the door and upward as though he would pierce the intervening walls and floors between this room and the suite where Mr. Nuhart was held prisoner in his own home. He said, gratingly, "But he's a good man, John. Not deserving what's happening here. He's a good man."

John wanted to urge him to hurry on with the story. He felt again the necessity of conserving time.

But his voice came, gently, "I'm sure he is. And then you brought Miss Leetha here, you say?"

"Yes, I did. It was after—after they both went, Leetha's parents. Their car stalled on the train track. Everybody said there wasn't time for them to suffer." The old man paused a moment, swallowed, and went on. "So I brought Miss Leetha here. Mr. Nuhart was on a trip and didn't know what happened. I did what I thought was right."

"It was right," John defended. "Mr. Nuhart was glad to have her, wasn't he?"

"Glad!" Bert Oberg echoed. "He certainly was. He thought the sun rose and set in the girl. She was eight, then, such a thin little thing, you'd think a strong wind would blow her away." Another sigh came from the depths of his heart. "She's thin yet—and I'd give ten years of my life to know if she's all right up there now."

"She must be, Oberg. She didn't say she'd been mistreated, did she?"

"Didn't say—" the old man repeated dully.

"In that note she slipped down the chute. She didn't mention that she'd suffered, did she?"

"No. No, she didn't." Bert Oberg brightened. "That was smart of her, John, slipping that note down. You see, the regular chute runs up to the linen closet on the third floor. She couldn't get in there, because she's locked in her suite. But there's a

kind of an arm, a smaller chute, that leads from her dressing room. That's how she got the note down."

"That string is still dangling there, in the chute, isn't it?"

"Why—sure. I just pulled the note off."

"Well, we can send a message up to her—if we need to."

"That's right." Light came into the worn face. "We can. It's about the only way we could do it, too. Dud brought their breakfasts up on trays this morning. Mr. Borton stood right beside him. He put the trays in with one hand, and in the other—."

"He's got a gun. I know." There was silence.

Bert Oberg frowned. "You came here on account of last night, when Miss Leetha got hold of the telephone, didn't you?"

"That's right. She called the Hayford home, where Mrs. Parker is staying now."

The old man nodded. "I've heard Mrs. Parker talk about the Hayfords. She thought the world and all of them. I thought you were Rick."

"He's a good friend of mine—in the service now. I came here to take his place. Intended to pass off as Rick—but then your Mr. Borton found me out."

Bert Oberg snorted. "Don't call him my Mr. Borton, John, not by a long shot! He caught Miss Leetha last night, just when she opened her mouth to talk, and pulled her away. I wasn't near enough to see it.

Old Gran was fussy. Like I told you, she knows something's going on here. She knows there's strangers around. And she was lonesome for Mrs. Parker. So that's how it happened I was in with her. But Dud was putting some milk on to boil, the way she likes it, and he heard the commotion. Mr. Borton pulled Leetha away and they went into his study. He must've called the Hill House—."

"Called the Hill House?"

"That's it. He's got a kind of a telephone in there that connects with the place."

John remembered how Alfred Borton had left him during that travesty of showing him through the house, how he had hurried into the study. It must have been to communicate with his fellow-workers, whoever and whatever they were.

Bert Oberg was saying, "If he doesn't call it seems every now and then *they* call in here and if Mr. Borton wants anything, they come. It's been going on since Saturday, soon after Mrs. Parker left."

John said grimly, "They keep tabs, eh? And then he had the telephone wires cut, I mean the outside telephone?"

"I don't know just how he managed it. I think he must've done that himself. Dud says he heard Miss Leetha crying and saying, 'Oh, Sooze! Come quick —!' Something like that, but she didn't get any answer. Dud wanted to march in and smash Mr. Bor-

ton, but he couldn't. Those two in the Hill House came—" The old man broke off with a sound like a groan. His head shook wearily. "I never thought I'd live to see this day!"

Pity shone in John's eyes as he regarded the drooping old shoulders, but over them, near the shaded door, he thought he caught a slight movement, as though someone were lifting the shade, peering in at them. Giving no sign of his suspicion, he rose easily, hands in the pockets of his breeches and strode toward the stove. He paused there a moment, moving the kettle to the outer edge, away from the heat. Then casually, he opened the door.

There was no one there, no sound, no movement, and yet John had the sensation that unseen eyes had been trained on them, that some living presence had, only a moment ago, removed itself.

The urgency of making the most of the allotted time came to him again and he strode to where Bert Oberg stood, his eyes keen with inquiry. John said, "I thought someone was there—but the pantry's empty." He lowered his voice, "Sit down here, Oberg. I want you to tell me everything, everything you think may be important—so I can do my best to help."

"Sure, I will, John. I'll tell you the whole story, but—," hopelessness settled over him like a dark shroud, "what good it's going to do, I can't see. You're in the same fix now, aren't you?—locked up

here with the rest of us? With those sneaks out there in the Hill House spying on us? And they come here, too. Likely as not they're in the place now, watching." He looked directly into John's face. "We thought you were one of them, when you first came. But I knew right off you couldn't be, John. You don't look like they do! And then I wanted you to—"

"To get the sheriff. I got your message, Oberg, but it wouldn't have worked out."

"No. It wouldn't have worked out. *They* would have stopped you!"

John's hand was on the old man's shoulder, steadily. "Oberg, we can't go back—we've got to go on. There's a way out of this—there must be. And we'll find it. Now, tell me about Mr. Nuhart and Leetha. You say they've been locked in their rooms since last evening?"

"That's it. Locked in their own home, like prisoners!"

"But Dud was permitted to bring them their trays—?"

"With *him* standing there, holding his gun!"

John bit his lip. "It won't last much longer," he said thoughtfully. "Borton told me the time was short. If he had realized how short, he wouldn't have dismissed Mrs. Parker."

"He did, huh?"

John nodded.

"So things are coming to a head. You know, I wondered why Mrs. Parker didn't get the police in on this, knowing how things were here. But she wouldn't hear of it. She wanted a friend to investigate—from the inside."

Bert Oberg shook his white head negatively. "Mrs. Parker didn't know all there was to know, John. Those two fellows in the Hill House didn't come till Saturday, after she left here. And I can bet you I know why she wouldn't hear of calling the sheriff—she's afraid Mr. Nuhart's in trouble. She knows he is."

"You mean, that falling-out he had with his business partner?"

"That's what I mean."

"But not this mixup with Borton?"

Bert Oberg shook his head fiercely. "No, sir! Not any of this! Mr. Nuhart's a good man, John, a good man. If he's in trouble, it's something that's not his fault. But I'd stake my soul he doesn't know what these sneaks are up to, any more than you or I do!"

John nodded, gratified. "I'm glad of that."

"Why," Bert Oberg took a deep breath, preparing to elaborate, "you couldn't live in the same house with the man two days and not like him, John. It was he told me to bring Old Gran here, told me this'd be her home." His eyes softened. "She'd sit out there on the terrace in the sun like she was

the lady of the house, rocking herself and smelling the sweet air. And Dud—Dud's my son's boy. He's an orphan too, like Miss Leetha. Well, he told me Dud should stay on. I've been sending him to country school—it's about half a mile east, and the kid thinks of the Nest like it was his home. He'd help me here, and Mrs. Parker. She said she couldn't keep house here without Dud."

John was looking at the old man intently, but his ears were tuned to catch any sound that might come from the pantry. There was none, but beyond it, in the kitchen, he thought he heard the boy moving about. He said, "Mr. Nuhart must be a fine man. But I've been thinking about Old Gran. Why does Borton resent her presence here? Was she here before his time?"

"Sakes, yes. Mr. Borton only came—why, about two years ago, it was. At first he didn't seem to mind her, or didn't let on if he did. But lately, the last couple of months, he's made it plain he *doesn't* like her. Saturday afternoon, after Mrs. Parker'd gone, he laid down the law. Said Old Gran was to stay in her room, with the door shut. He said she couldn't see anyhow, so we could keep the lights out in there." A vein grew tight, blue, in the old man's forehead. One knotted hand went to his white mop of hair, smoothing it as though to clear away unwelcome thoughts. He looked suddenly at John.

"Did you notice them? The lights, I mean?"

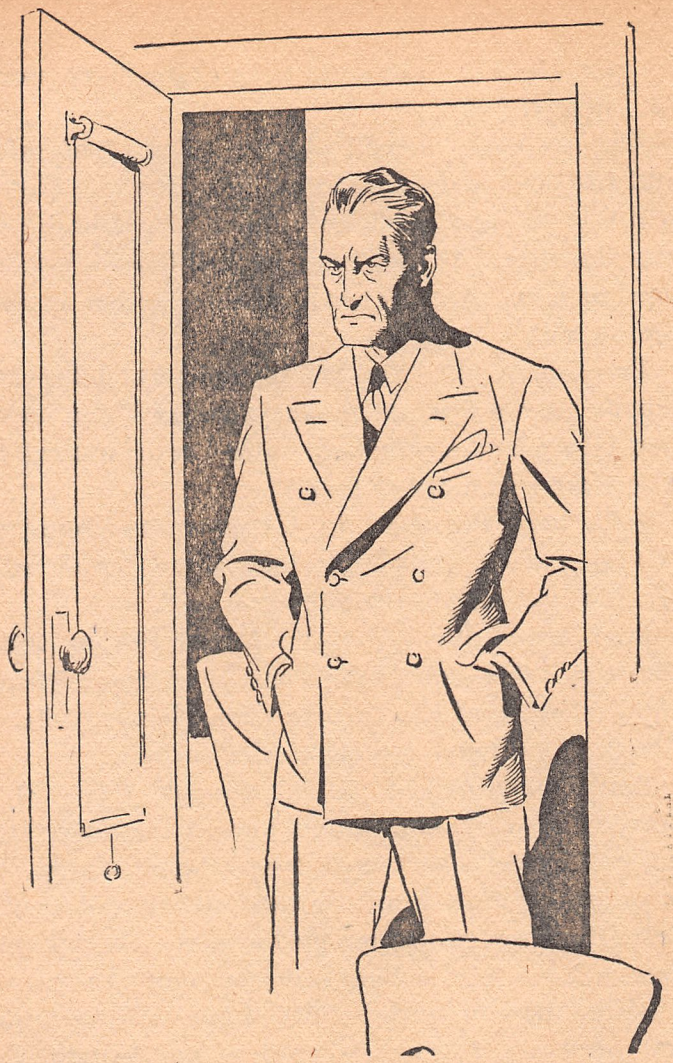
"Why, no—I hadn't."

"We got electric lights now. We had gas till last year. Mr. Nuhart said we could have an electric stove, but Mrs. Parker wouldn't hear of it. She liked the big range." He sighed, thinking perhaps of Mrs. Parker standing before the great stove, or bending to look in the oven. He said, above a groan, "If anybody had told me things would ever be like this around here, I'd have called him a liar, John. It's crazy, that's what. Mr. Borton's out of his head. He must be, to make all this trouble here!"

The door with the shade opened, and Alfred Borton stood there. He said, "I'm in full possession of my faculties, Oberg. You may not be capable of understanding it, but I am acting in a most intelligent manner. I have been given the opportunity of a lifetime and, being a man of sense, I am making the most of my opportunity."

The words were quietly spoken, with a trace of amused condescension. But Oberg's face, flaming, then going ashen, bent downward, as though to seek refuge from an acid drenching. Instinctively, he cringed away and John took a forward step, so that he came nearer to the secretary. He took his cue neatly.

Ignoring the hand Alfred Borton kept hidden in his pocket, John let a trace of admiration show in



The Door Opened and Alfred Borton Stood There

his face. He said, "You seem to be doing pretty well, Mr. Borton."

The secretary seemed pleased. "I am," he said, and his black eyes glinted at Bert Oberg. "There will be two more guests for dinner," he announced complacently. "As I told you, we will have our main meal at noon. And we shall all eat together in the dining hall."

Bert Oberg said, "Yes, Mr. Borton," but John had caught his eye first, caught the message. "You see?" Bert Oberg had telegraphed. "Miss Leetha was right. There are two more of them!"

John kept the word in his conscious thought, "Guest. I am a guest." He said, aloud, "And will Mr. Nuhart and Miss Shepley join us?"

Dark brows lifted slightly. Alfred Borton said, "Perhaps." He held John's eye a moment, then stepped backward, clearing the door. He said to Bert Oberg, "Dud needs a hand in the kitchen."

Bert Oberg looked patient enough. "Yes, Mr. Borton," he said, and moved toward the door. He turned, looking backward from the secretary to John, and John's heart warmed to the old man. Bert Oberg was concerned for his safety. He did not want to leave John in here with the quiet-faced man.

Alfred Borton smiled. "Mr. Lane will be with you presently, Oberg. As soon as he changes his clothes."

John felt his face grow hot. Anger drummed in his head and burned in the depths of his soul. He ached to have his turn at pushing this smirking fellow, wiping the meaningless smile from his thin mouth. He said, and his voice sounded husky, "Don't you like this outfit, Mr. Borton? Isn't it what the well-dressed prisoner will wear?"

Alfred Borton shrugged lightly. "You are dressed suitably for the outdoors, Mr. Lane, but you must be uncomfortably warm. Oberg keeps up the fires well."

John realized that he still wore his outer jacket and he was warm. He was burning up, but not because he stood near the round stove. His hands in his pockets were clenched, but he held himself back. Not yet, caution warned. Not while so many helpless persons were involved, needing him. "Easy does it," he reminded himself, and felt his tension leave.

Alfred Borton said, "You are, also, an intelligent person, Mr. Lane. I will thank you if you will please remove your outer clothing." He smiled. "You will not be needing these things, but—I will."

He motioned to Bert Oberg to leave and the old man did so. Alfred Borton followed. The door with the shade closed softly after him. John stood rooted to the spot, glaring at the door. The words of his captor lingered in the still air. "You will not be needing these things, but I will."

CHAPTER SEVEN

OLD GRAN IS VALUABLE

John had the room with the windows to himself. Bert Oberg had gone to the kitchen to help Dud in the preparation of dinner, the noon meal, which they would all eat together.

John's thought lingered there.

They would all be together. That would mean Alfred Borton and his henchmen. It would mean Bert Oberg, Dud, and himself. Not Old Gran. Bert Oberg must care for his mother as one would a child, alone, away from curious eyes. At any rate, in Alfred Borton's mind, she would not count. She would be out of it.

But what about Lyman Nuhart and Leetha? Would they be permitted to come down to the dining hall?

John's guess was that they would be included. In all probability, Alfred Borton feared the stew might be too highly seasoned—with poison! So, they would all eat together.

But if the secretary were afraid, he did not show it. John heard his voice, quiet, coolly imperative, but too far away to distinguish what was being said.

The dining hall was around the bend in the pantry, to the left. That was where the voice seemed to be coming from. It was John's impulse to burst in on the speaker, to demand—

He checked himself.

To demand what?

Clothes, for one thing. If he were to change, Alfred Borton must have others for him.

"So I rush into the dining hall," John growled to himself, "and I shout, 'Where are my clothes?' It doesn't make sense." He ground his teeth. Nothing made sense, and if he tried to demand some sort of explanation, he would in all probability be met with that icy wall of fake courtesy. He recalled Alfred Borton's smug declaration. He would be "needing" the shirt John wore, the breeches.

John's hand jammed into the pocket of the jacket. He felt Rick's pipe, the pouch of tobacco. These, his wallet, his toothbrush and shaving kit, and a handkerchief were all he had with him.

He strode to the dresser and opened a small drawer at the top, to the right. It was the work of a moment to slip the things inside, to shut the drawer again. He looked swiftly to the door with the shade. It was tightly closed.

But he felt better. He had established a link with the world he had left, a weak, probably useless connection, but it helped. It was something to steady

him, to remind him that the four walls of the Nest were not the boundaries of all space.

But they bounded all space for him now. They might have bounded the world. This was his world, this rambling old building where mutiny flamed, where a small reign of terror held the whole place in an iron grip. No, not an iron grip. Alfred Borton's way was different. It was more like the progress of a treacherous and deadly snake, creeping along through sweet-scented grass, coming to feast upon the small creatures that had already been captured, rendered almost lifeless.

John was looking at the round mirror and presently his face came into focus. He gave a start of surprise, and one hand went to his cheek. He had not shaved this morning, and needed to, but the stubble was not astonishing. Rick's clothes, which were still not a part of him, had something to do with it. But the sensation that he was looking at a stranger was mostly due to the expression on his own face. He looked decidedly foggy, stumped.

"It won't do," he told himself. "The whole thing's a nasty mess, whatever Borton's game might be. The thing to do is play along—and beat him to it!" He repeated to himself what he had told Bert Oberg, to cheer him. "There's a way out. There's *got* to be!"

He strode away from the dresser toward the window. Unconsciously, he came to the opening in

the pane where he could look up at the black hawk. It had been put there by the two partners, Lyman Nuhart, and—what was the other man's name?

Reid Morrow.

They were "sharp as a hawk" and "smart as a whip," and this was a kind of good luck omen, the hawk clawing at the coils of the whip.

John's mouth twisted into a smile without mirth. Good luck!

But this was getting him nowhere. He was wasting time. This was a lull, and it would be better to collect his scattering wits, put the pieces he had gathered together.

He counted off the people in the house. Lyman Nuhart and Leetha Shepley, prisoners on the third floor. There was Bert Oberg and Dud, loyal to their rightful master. They were stationed on the first floor, here. So would he be. So was Old Gran in the room off the kitchen.

John's thoughts touched her a lingering moment. Alfred Borton had commanded that she remain in her room, in darkness.

Why?

So he would be less likely to see her? That must be it. Alfred Borton was afraid. He was afraid to face the unseeing fire in those staring, sightless eyes. In the depths of his soul, he was a craven. He was bloated with the power he had filched from Lyman Nu-

hart, the tyranny a little man skyrocketed to power could exert over the weak and helpless. Someone had given him that power. Recently.

Who was it?

Time would tell. Time must tell.

But if Alfred Borton were alone, it would be a different story. He was backed by his sneak guards here in the Nest, and in the near-by Hill House. But what if he were alone? What if that weapon should be snatched from him, thrown aside?

John dwelt upon the infinite pleasure to be derived from the feel of Alfred Borton's white neck between his fingers. His own hands knotted. He brought one fist up and smashed it into the palm of his free hand. He would make the attempt at his next opportunity. He would leave this place now—!

And he heard a sound behind him. He had not heard the door open, but now it closed.

He whirled and saw the man who stood there, watching him. He saw the blur of heavy clothing heaped over one arm, the leather moccasins. Bert Oberg had said that one of the men in the Hill House was big and blond and John knew this must be he. The old man had not said that the guard was square-faced, with a blunt, pressed-down nose and merciless green eyes. John discovered this for himself now, and that the man wore almost shabby clothing, a dark brown suit, a black overcoat, frayed

at the cuffs. Small threads spread over a wide, freckled wrist. Overshoes on his feet were wet from a recent walk through the snow.

Even as John was measuring the guard, so the big man looked at him. He seemed to be waiting for some word of complaint, or some question.

John proved a disappointment. He held the green eyes with a cool disdain and waited.

The blond fellow shrugged, went to the nearest bed and put down his burden. Breeches of a deep blue woolen material, a red plaid shirt, a dark-red slipover sweater. There were two pairs of woolen socks, and the moccasins. Everything had a well-worn but not lately used, look. The shirt and breeches showed evidence of having been folded. John looked from the assortment back to the man. His hand, free of the clothing, held a mate to Alfred Borton's gun. The fellow motioned with it for John to make the change.

John shrugged, seated himself on the edge of the bed. As he began to unlace his boots, he heard the springs of the next bed creak as his companion seated himself, one thick hand on the moccasins.

John said, "I'm going to wear those?"

"You're going to wear those."

John's head raised, surprised. The man's voice was too high, out of keeping with the flat nose, the bulging shoulders. He must have been aware of his

shortcoming, and sensitive about it. His face drew into a mean scowl. The gun glinted as he moved it. John bent to his task and pulled away at the boots.

John had made many changes of costume, quick changes, very frequently with a make-up man standing by, urging haste, but nothing that even remotely suggested this present set-up had ever happened to him before. No one had urged him on with the assistance of a loaded revolver—and never for one moment did John doubt that it was loaded.

As John took off the coat, the shirt, the breeches, the big man almost pounced on each article. He rolled all into a bundle over the boots, jamming it under one arm. The other hand had the gun. He kept it on John as he moved, backward, toward the door. It had not been tightly closed and he kicked backward, opening it. He said, from the doorway, "When you're dressed, you can come out."

John was jamming the shirt down into his breeches. He said grimly, "Thanks."

Big teeth, widely spaced in the front, showed as the blond man smiled. He said, "You're welcome," and disappeared.

John looked after him a moment, then grabbed up his belt. "Pleasant kind of guy," he muttered to himself. He noted that the man made no sound as he withdrew, like a great cat in the jungle. A sigh of relief welled up in John's chest, and he busied him-

self with putting on the wool socks. They, like the shirt and trousers, fitted him well enough, but the feel of the clothing galled him. There was nothing of a striped uniform here to proclaim him a prisoner, but that was what the clothing amounted to. He had been forced to put on another man's things, to the evident amusement of his departed jailor. His clothes, Rick's clothes, were "needed."

A long, long thought could come in there, but John pushed it aside. He would be a fool not to perceive that they had another man waiting to put on the things he had just removed, that the clothes counted. But *he* did not. But that was what he would not think about. He *meant* to count, no matter what they thrust at him, no matter what waited.

He would hurry and lace the moccasins and find Bert Oberg.

And then, looking up, John saw the old man coming in, stealthily, with one backward glance. Satisfied that no one was in the pantry way, he closed the door, looked at John anxiously, taking him in from head to foot.

John relieved him instantly.

"I'm okay, almost ready." He grinned down at one foot he had braced against the side of the bed, shrugged, and went on lacing the leather thong. "Not a bad fit, Oberg."

Bert Oberg sighed heavily. He must have been

thinking of John's breeches, his jacket, his boots, thinking and wondering. He said presently, "He's gone out the back door. To the Hill House."

"Good." John finished with the moccasins, and slipped his arms into the sweater. "Maybe you keep the fires up," he said, "but it's breezy in here."

"Oh, it is," Bert Oberg spoke hastily from the depths of his relief. "It's draughty all right. I got the furnace going good, too."

John stepped close to him. He said, under his breath, "And I might get a chance to make a break. I want to be all set."

Bert Oberg nodded gravely. He moved toward the door, waited for John. They went together into the pantry.

John glanced toward the door that led to the dining hall. He could see the long slit of the sunlight that glinted through from top to bottom, with no interfering shadow. So there was no one there—now. And the blond man had gone out the back door to the Hill House. They were, for the time being, alone.

When they came into the kitchen, Bert Oberg gestured toward the back door. He said softly, "*Both* of 'em went out."

John did some rapid arithmetic. If the two who had been here since Saturday joined the two who had recently arrived, that would mean there were

now four guards in the Hill House. *If* they had all gone out there.

But Alfred Borton likely remained here in the Nest, near the study, where he could keep in constant touch with them, where he could direct the proceedings.

John said, suddenly, "Oberg, where are Borton's rooms?"

"His rooms—?" the old man repeated.

John gave a subdued snort. "The whole house, huhm? No, I mean, where does he sleep? In the study?"

"Sometimes," Bert Oberg nodded toward the back door, "and sometimes in the cellar apartment."

It had an unfamiliar ring, and John would have questioned further, had not the back door opened that instant. Dud came in, his arms crossed over three quart jars. He brought them to the center table and set them down, but not before his eye had taken in John's change of clothing.

Bert Oberg said, "Strawberry sauce for dinner. You like strawberries, John?"

John was watching Dud's face. The lad had put on a welcoming smile for John, but it was on the surface. At the back of his soul was terror. It shone through.

John said, more heartily than was necessary, "You picked my favorite, Dud. We'll have a feast." He

looked over at the stove. "That stew surely smells good. What time do we eat?"

"Twelve o'clock," the old man said, and he and John both looked at the clock over the sink. Bert Oberg said, "An hour away. You want a bite now?"

"No—no," John shook his head. And even as they stood there, with the smell and the sight of the dinner in preparation, John had the feeling that the time would not come when they would actually sit down together at the table. Before that time he would wake up, be himself again. There was nothing real about this. They moved about the high kitchen, they talked about simple things, but back of it all was the fear of unseen, watchful eyes. Dud, going to the sink with the jars, opening them, was a puppet pulled by an invisible string. Bert Oberg, standing beside him, briefly pointing out the dishes that were to be used, bringing down extra salt cellars, he was another puppet.

John heard himself say suddenly, "Have you any jobs for me, Oberg?" And when the old man turned to him, he added, "I was told to take my orders from you."

Bert Oberg growled something under his breath and then they heard the muted singsong from the dark room. "Old Gran," Bert Oberg murmured and went in to her. After what could have been only a few moments, John followed, to the small table at

the back window where he could look in. Old Gran was in her rocking chair and Bert Oberg was standing beside her, holding one of her hands. He looked up at John.

"I think you better get acquainted with her," he said, and hesitated an instant. "If you want to."

"Why, certainly, Oberg." John came nearer, smiling down into the uplifted eyes which seemed trained on his face. He had to remind himself that Old Gran could not see him, nor hear him, and he stopped. His hands went out helplessly, self-consciously. "How do I do it?" he asked, his voice low.

Bert Oberg kept one of Old Gran's hands in his and reached for one of John's. As the knotted fingers came to rest, John was surprised at their softness. Nor was the touch cold. Old Gran muttered something and John could understand what she said now.

"Is it a stranger—? No. No, it's not a stranger. It is a friend. A friend come to see us."

John started to say, "Yes, I am a friend," but he caught himself. He must make Old Gran understand without the use of words. Bert Oberg had stepped farther into the room, and John glanced toward him questioningly, but the old man only nodded his head. He seemed entirely satisfied.

Old Gran's other hand lifted and reached out toward John. He found himself falling to his knees before the rocking chair. Both her hands came to-

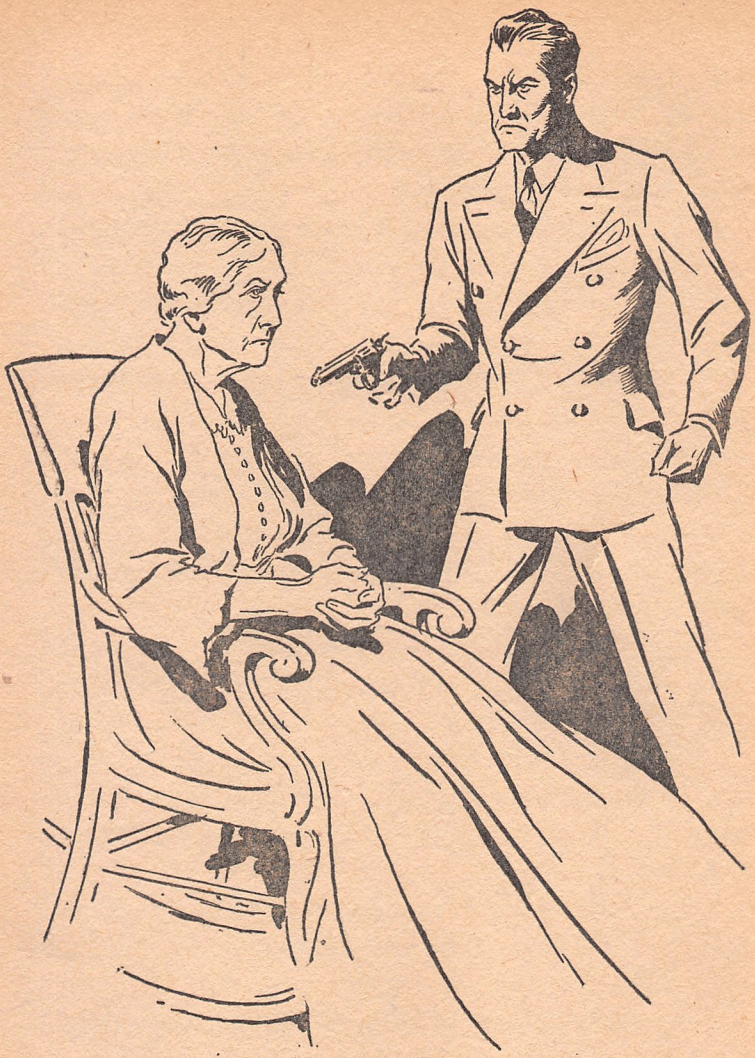
ward him, resting lightly on his head. They explored his hairline. "It is a boy," she said, "a nice boy." The hands touched his ears, his cheeks, and felt the stubble there. But Old Gran held to her first conviction. "A nice boy," she said again, pleased. "He is a friend of ours. We want to have friends." A pitiful sigh came from the old woman's throat. "Not strangers," she whispered. "No, not strangers." For a moment the grip of her hands tensed on John's shoulders, then Old Gran shrank backward in the chair. She had a shawl over her shoulders and she drew it closer, holding it tight.

John gave the taut fingers a reassuring pat, and was preparing to rise when it seemed the back door burst open. From his kneeling position, he turned and saw Borton standing like an image of fury.

"What are you doing in there?" he almost screamed. "What is the meaning of this?" His eyes, boring from John to Bert Oberg, blazed; and as he strode nearer, his hands rose over his head, the fingers upraised and quivering. "What did I tell you about that room, Oberg? Keep it dark! Keep it closed. Keep her out of the way—do you hear me?"

They all heard him—John, who came to his feet, and Bert Oberg who emerged from the shadows to stand nearer to John. Dud, who was over near the stove, seemed to grow suddenly taller.

There was a strained moment of silence, not a



He Trained the Gun on Old Gran

happy one, yet John had a wild desire to laugh. Alfred Borton's rage at discovering him at the feet of the little old lady seemed weirdly unreasonable. His hysteria was ludicrous.

The secretary felt their hatred, and that he did not mind, but John's contemptuous eye fanned the fire out of control. Alfred Borton seemed not to hear when Bert Oberg essayed an explanation. "It was my fault, Mr. Borton. I brought John—," and the words were swallowed from there on, lost as the furious man snatched the revolver from his pocket and thrust it forward. "I'll show you!" he hissed. "I'll teach you how it is to obey!" And now he was not funny. He trained the weapon, not on John, nor on Bert Oberg, but on the rocking chair.

Old Gran could not see him, nor hear what had been said, yet a sixth sense must have warned her that danger threatened. She began to whimper piteously, "Strangers are coming, son. Tell the nice boy to make them go away." Her hands groped to her side where Bert Oberg had been standing. "Tell him, son. Tell him."

"Make her shut her mouth!" Alfred Borton blazed at the old man. "Make her stop that crazy whining, or I'll put a bullet through her head!"

John planted himself directly in front of Old Gran. He could hear Bert Oberg moving nearer to his mother and knew that he was patting her hands,

smoothing the snowy hair from her forehead. He could see Dud, too, crouching against the side of the cupboard, his eyes glued to the secretary's face. John heard his own voice, and it surprised him. He sounded so reasonable.

"What good would it do you to kill her, Mr. Borton?"

"What good?"

It would be the work of an instant for Alfred Borton to pull the trigger, yet John kept his eyes level. He heard Bert Oberg closing the door behind him, closing Old Gran out of sight, and that was a relief. He said, "Yes, what good? Surely you have nothing to fear from an old woman—a woman who can't see—can't hear."

John thought he had hit the nail on the head. The gun wavered, came lower. "I'm not afraid of her," Alfred Borton said. "I fear no one."

"That," John thought, "is one large lie," but he nodded his head in understanding. Quiet came into the high kitchen. One of the faucets dripped in the sink. The clock over it ticked, missed a tick, went plunging on. A burned stick of wood fell with a muted thud inside the great stove.

Alfred Borton said again, "No, I'm not afraid of the old woman," and the excitement that gripped him seemed to have died out, leaving him cool again, master of himself, and the house. He smiled.

"In fact, I have a respect for her. She is valuable to me. Wait—!" He held up one hand. "Engler!" he called. "Sargus!" And it seemed that one hand opened the two doors leading into the room. Almost in the same instant, the blond man came from the back hallway, and another, much shorter, older, with a dark hat pulled down over a thin, pointed face, entered from the pantry way.

Again, Alfred Borton smiled.

"My friends," he said, "are always in attendance."

This was evident, not only from their amazingly prompt appearance, but from the attention they gave the white-faced man. They were like a couple of wolves, leashed, with the smell of blood in their nostrils. They ached to be freed, to pounce.

Alfred Borton said, "Engler!" and the blond man came to him. He towered over the secretary, grasping the quality of his orders, but with a divided attention. His green eyes glowered at John, the handsome young fellow who had sneered at him!

Prodded by the blond man's weapon, John, Bert Oberg, and Dud were eased toward the cupboards, near the sink. Alfred Borton had his gun ready, but he kept back a little, near the center table, where he could direct the proceedings.

John thought, "Why did I wait? Why wait *now?* If Borton's out of the way—!" And he saw the dark man easing close to the secretary. This was Sargus,

the dark man. Alfred Borton nodded in the direction of the dim room. Sargus bowed his head and John saw the ragged scar that ran the length of his right cheek, pulling his mouth into a constant death-like grin. The man seemed lost in his clothes, a blue mackinaw, corduroy trousers. He looked anything but powerful, and that was misleading. There was terrific energy in his arms, energy they were to discover soon.

It happened like lightning. Sargus seemed to rip off his belt, which was not a belt but a length of knotted leather, a vile-looking whip. The door of the dark room was flung open, and the leather thong coiled into space, cracking, finding its mark.

There was a cry, piteous, terrified, and that must have been Old Gran when the lash found her. Another shout rent the air, lapping over on the sound, a hoarse bellow of rage that shook the room. It might have been his own voice, or Bert Oberg's or a mingling of the two. John did not know. But he surged forward, burning to get at Alfred Borton's throat. His fingers reached for the hand that held the revolver, reached, but never found his mark. He heard, rather than felt, the blow at the base of his head. Then there was the sharp sting of pain, dulling his senses, so that when he fell he was not fully aware that he struck the floor. Silence, blackness pressed down upon him.

CHAPTER EIGHT

ACTION!

John opened his eyes reluctantly, fighting a heavy ball of fire, a glare that seemed to sear his brain. He was lying down, on a bed, he discovered. The painful glare was the sun, coming at him from the highest part of one of the frosted windows. His eyes ached, his whole head throbbed, and he would have turned away from the sun had he not heard the voice, like the beat of a distant drum.

"That's better. Coming to, aren't you?"

It brought John to a sitting position. Leaning on one elbow, he fought the light, the pounding in his head, and searched for the speaker. He saw Alfred Borton standing with his back to the window, the window which was in Oberg's and Dud's quarters. Over the slender shoulders, John could see the image of the hawk.

The fog seemed to clear instantly in his head. The pain was there, but he could think straight. He sat upright, put his feet on the floor. He heard his own voice, thickly. "Did you hurt her? Tell me, is she all right?"

"You mean the old woman?"

John was on his feet. For an uncertain moment, he swayed, and the white face before him seemed to recede into a vague background. But it came back.

John said grimly, "You know who I mean. Old Gran, Bert Oberg's mother—!"

The secretary considered him thoughtfully, not what he said, for that seemed of no importance. He drew a step nearer. John saw him, but he saw, too, the movement at the open door. He knew one of the guards was there, and he smiled wryly. Alfred Borton would not run the risk of being alone with a man he had seen struck down, unconscious, dragged in here like a sack of meal.

Alfred Borton said softly, "Yes, Engler is in the pantry. Let's have no more nonsense. It's a waste of time."

"You call it nonsense? To strike an old and defenseless woman?"

"I call it foolish to lose one's temper. I told you, if you would obey orders, no harm would come to you. If you were hurt, well," he shrugged, "you asked for it."

John folded his arms across his chest. "I'm not complaining," he said. "Now what?"

The secretary nodded with approval. "Much better," he said, and his dark eyes seemed to dart over the red sweater, the moccasins. "It was the best we could manage," he said. "I hope you're quite com-

fortable."

John's hand went over his hair and at the back of his head he felt the spot where he had been struck, by Engler, no doubt.

"Time," he thought. "I need a little time to get this ironed out. But it counts. Every minute counts."

He knew suddenly that the way in which he might have figured in the intricate maze of Alfred Borton's plan had undergone a change. From the start, he had been an interloper, doomed to extinction. But there had been some measure of reality in his being of service. There had been some way in which he might have served. Now, John knew, he was no longer needed. His usefulness was in the past. He wondered, "Was it the clothes? Now that he's got them—?"

He said aloud, "I'm quite comfortable, Borton. But I'd feel much better if I knew that old lady was all right."

Alfred Borton shrugged. "She's all right. You don't hear her whining, do you?"

"No, I don't." Nor did he. But was that the answer? The lash might have been so severe as to put all pain away for Old Gran.

The white-faced man was rubbing his hands together. The skin was dry. The soft swishing sound grated on John's ears. He felt again the urge to forget all caution and make a lunge for the fellow. But,

with an effort, he hid his thought, letting his eyes travel away from the secretary, toward the door with the shade.

If you matched courtesy of speech with the white-faced secretary, you would gain much more than attempting to strong-arm the situation. Alfred Borton could not be in his right senses, but he was master of Hawk's Nest at this moment. Engler, Sargus obeyed him. How many more there were who followed his bidding, he could not guess. The thing to do now was to play along.

John said, "You found someone to wear my clothes?"

"Oh, yes. Yes, indeed." The secretary lifted one arm, consulted a wrist watch. "He left not ten minutes ago. Took the train out."

John said, "I see."

"Yes," Alfred Borton nodded pleasurably, "everything went smoothly. Our man called the Woods' place from the depot. The connection was not the best, and his voice might well have been yours. He explained that all was well at Hawk's Nest and he would not be stopping longer—going right on back."

"I see," John said again. "So I've gone back."

"You've gone back."

"To the Hayfords?" John's tone sharpened. "To tell Mrs. Parker all was well here?"

Alfred Borton shook his head. "Oh, no. You

would not have time for them, either. You wired to that effect. You were in a hurry—Mr. Payne."

John looked up, startled.

"Yes," the white-faced man said smoothly, "I have your right name now—the wallet you left there, in the dresser drawer. It has been destroyed of course, along with the other items you left there."

John said nothing, only looked at the man. Evidently, the secretary was disappointed. He had expected some kind of outburst, some show of indignation, or perhaps a reference to the guards who must have been watching him.

But in that moment, John felt incapable of speech. His head began to pound again, not only with the pain, but with the confusion of this stilted bandying of words, of using courtesy as a clothing for cunning. The unreality of the situation seemed suddenly like an insupportable weight, crushing him, robbing him of the use of his will. It was a unique kind of torture, the cat permitting the half-dead mouse to discourse upon the merits of various kinds of cheese.

Alfred Borton's voice came, a little sharply. "You said something, Mr. Payne?"

John looked up quickly. "Did I?" he said. "I must have been thinking out loud. About cheese. I'm very fond of cheese."

A frown creased the white forehead. "Indeed?"

And the smile returned slowly. "I'm afraid we're out of cheese today, Mr. Payne. But we have plenty of butter—and eggs. Thanks to you."

"Reminding me again," John thought, "that I barged in here, and I can take the consequences." But he felt suddenly more cheerful. On the surface, there was no reason why he should. Another man was wearing his clothes, boarding a train, taking away his identity, perhaps killing all hope of any help from the outside. But, nevertheless, John had pricked the bubble that was Alfred Borton's self esteem. The way the fellow had said, suspiciously, "You said something?" showed that he was on edge, worried, perhaps waiting for orders from his own superior. If that were the case, if Alfred Borton were waiting, then there would be still some time, time in which to get his bearings, perhaps time to form a plan with Bert Oberg.

Through the partly open door, there came the clink of dishes, the jangle of silver. Was Bert Oberg removing the things from the table, or setting it?

John said, "Have you had dinner, Mr. Borton?"

"No, not yet." Alfred Borton glanced toward the door, back to John. "Oberg's getting it ready now. Owing to the unfortunate incident—we are a little late."

The unfortunate incident. Seeing that whip lash out at Oberg's helpless mother, with two guns train-

ed on him. And perhaps Oberg had been hurt, too. Perhaps it was Dud who was setting the table.

But John made himself be still, made himself wait.

And it paid.

"There will be eight of us," Alfred Borton said. "Myself, Mr. Nuhart, Miss Shepley, Engler, Sargus —and the three of you."

"That just about takes us all in, doesn't it?"

Alfred Borton shook his head. "Not all, Mr. Payne —but enough of us so that everything runs smoothly." He stepped backward, "And perhaps you could help Oberg, if you feel able?"

"I feel fine."

"Good." The secretary stepped back farther, an invitation for John to proceed. John walked in front of him, to the door with the shade. Engler was there, looming taller in the shadows, and even in the darkness of the room, John saw the glint of his little eyes. Engler was waiting for his second chance, for a complete kill.

John walked past him and opened the door to the kitchen. He went into the high room and felt an infinite satisfaction that Alfred Borton and Engler did not follow. They went the other way, to the dining hall.

No one was in the kitchen, and the room where Old Gran lived was closed away. But presently both Bert Oberg and Dud appeared, coming from the

pantry-way. Their eyes sharpened when they saw John.

Dud spoke first.

"You're—okay, mister?"

"I'm okay," John assured him, and glanced toward the closed door. Bert Oberg nodded. Old Gran was all right.

"It hit her foot," he said scarcely above a whisper. "But it didn't cut through. It's a good thing she was wearing those heavy socks."

John's hand was on the old man's arm. He cautioned silence, but more than that, he brought the old man's eyes to read his own. John was saying, without words, "We'll win through, Oberg. Keep your chin up."

Bert Oberg nodded. His mouth twitched, but not in fear, not in subjection. The old man was waiting, yearning as John yearned, for the right moment.

John said, "They're coming down for dinner."

"I know," Bert Oberg nodded. "I put another leaf in the table."

"Anything I can do to help?"

The ghost of a smile lighted the pale blue eyes. "You know how to set the table?"

"If you're not too fancy."

Bert Oberg patted his arm. "Never mind. Dud can do it. Maybe you can carry in the stew."

The old man opened the drawer in the center table. He took out a long handled fork, placed it in readiness. A large spoon went alongside the fork, on the table. His hand made the simple motion important, and his eye, finding John's suddenly, said with lightning clarity, "If I had any poison, he'd get it!"

But there would be nothing to disturb John's appetite, and he realized that he was hungry. It was happening again, as it had happened before—the simplicity, the rightness of the high-ceilinged kitchen was a steadying influence. The three of them were together again, the old man, the boy, and himself, and three heads were better than the brain of on madman. They would win out!

Bert Oberg and Dud must have felt the same upsurge of hope, for the door of the pantry opened and closed swiftly as they moved back and forth from the kitchen to the dining hall.

Bert Oberg said at length, "Everything's ready now." His eyes went nervously back toward the dining hall, came to John standing near the center table, and became critically aware of the young man's disheveled appearance. "There's a washroom at the end of the pantry, son," he said. "Wait, I'll get you a towel."

Dud opened one of the cupboard drawers, gave the hand-towel to the old man who in turn gave it

to John. "Bring it back," he said. "Hang it on the rack by the stove there. Old Gran carts everything loose to her room."

Soap and water had a livening effect. John felt immensely better when he brought the towel to its place on the rack. He was about to speak his thanks to the old man, but Bert Oberg, holding an immense bowl in shaking hands, motioned for silence.

"Mr. Borton says to serve now," he said. "They'll be coming down—."

John took the bowl from him, guessing at some of the cause for the old man's agitation. As before, he would serve Mr. Nuhart, the master of the Nest, but under trying circumstances. He would see the two people he loved brought to the table like prisoners. It would be hard to face them.

The steaming stew went into the bowl and John carried it to the dining hall. Bert Oberg held the door, and Dud was close behind them. But there was only one person in the room, Alfred Borton. He stood behind the chair which marked the head of the table, facing John as he entered. Back of the secretary were the blue tiles of the fireplace. The sun struck them through the row of high windows. More than ever, Alfred Borton looked the small, smug usurper, and John felt the bowl tilt in his hands.

"Be careful!" the man snapped and John said,

"Yes, sir," and kept his eyes down. Alfred Borton said, "There, at the foot of the table," and John simply nodded, going to the place assigned him. Dud went around to his left, and Bert Oberg remained near the swinging door.

For an awkward moment they waited.

John did not look at Bert Oberg, but he could sense the old man's eyes and ears, strained to catch the approach of Mr. Nuhart and Leetha. The guards were probably bringing them down. Alfred Borton would have his audience ready for their appearance, making it as unpleasant as possible. Probably teaching Leetha a lesson—in obedience. But whatever the secretary's plan might have been, it miscarried. Engler and Sargus appeared, not from the stairway, but from the hall which led to the back door. The two came in hurriedly, tension in their faces and in their whispered tones as they quickly made their report. Whatever it was, it cut the veneer from Alfred Borton's face. He was in turn vastly surprised, then worried. But he did not lose his awareness of the three at the farther end of the table.

With Sargus and Engler, he backed away a few steps, so that his conversation might not be heard, and the three had a quick consultation. John could not make out what was being said. He glanced over at Bert Oberg, and saw that the old man was deathly pale, fearing for the safety of his dear ones. There

They Had a Quick Consultation

was a chair against the wall near the tree of life tapestry where Bert Oberg stood, and he seemed to slump downward into it.

Dud said, "Gramp, are you sick?"

The old man muttered something and placed his hand to his head. John made a movement to go to him, but then Alfred Borton came back to his place. He said, almost snapped, "There's been a change in our plan. Oberg, take the trays to the third floor."

Bert Oberg said, dully, "A change—?"

Alfred Borton shrugged, turned to Sargus. The dark man's hat was over his face but the scar still showed. He said to the secretary, "Do we need to bother with them now?"

"I think so." His eye took in Bert Oberg cooly, dismissed him. "Let John Payne carry the trays. You go with him. Engler and I will go out there. You come, later."

John thought he heard Bert Oberg give a start. Perhaps it was because Alfred Borton had given him still another name. Perhaps it was because the small service had been denied him, the meager chance he might have had to see Mr. Nuhart and Leetha.

Sargus said, "All right—as you say. But it seems—."

Alfred Borton cut in, "I think it best, Sargus. They may still be useful."

Sargus lifted his shoulders, said no more. The secretary motioned to Engler and the two moved

away. They went from the room, toward the foot of the stairway. There Alfred Borton paused. He called back to Sargus, "We will be—there." His mouth lifted at one corner. "Mr. Payne might have fully recovered. Take no chances."

Sargus said, grimly, "I won't."

Then the two went out and the man with the scarred cheek came to the table. He shook one hand impatiently at Dud. "Get two trays ready. Bring them right here. And hurry."

Dud looked across the room at his grandfather. It was plain the boy shared his doubt and wonderment. What could have happened to make Alfred Borton change his plan so completely?

There was worry, too, in the boy, for his grandfather. Bert Oberg looked spent, as though he had run a long and losing race.

But Sargus was in a hurry and without pity.

"Get those trays ready," he snapped. "And don't try anything foolish. It would only make matters all the worse for you—and for them."

He added this last softly, "for them." He meant Mr. Nuhart and Leetha, and Old Gran. Eventually, John knew, Alfred Borton meant to be rid of them, but not now, not yet. They might be, in some way, useful. Perhaps because they held the key to obedience, the price of their safety was what he and Bert Oberg and Dud would pay by carrying out their

orders.

As John saw the trays being made ready, he thought of the opportunity that would be his. It was true, his hands would be heavily laden, but that might be the very answer. Steaming hot stew, correctly aimed, might serve the purpose.

Sargus seemed to read his mind.

"You *have* recovered, haven't you?" he said. "No, it isn't that simple. I am well armed." His hand in his pocket punctuated the remark. "And, even if I were overcome, there are the others. It would go much the worse for you."

John kept his eyes on Dud's hands as they placed the food on the two metal trays. He had in no way given up his intention of overpowering the dark man, but he tried to make his face a blank, to look resigned and beaten. He must have succeeded, for Sargus gave a sigh of satisfaction. He motioned with a sidewise twist of his head. "Come on, hurry."

"I'll do the best I can," John said, a little sullenly, "I've never done a waiter's work before."

"You'll do it now."

John took up the trays, more awkwardly than was necessary.

"Watch what you're doing!" Sargus said sharply. It was evident that he was nettled with his own part in the business of bringing food to the prisoners. He thought it unnecessary, and was more intent up-

on what was happening in the Hill House, perhaps chafing over his being left out of what must have been an important and new development. John's clumsiness irritated him further.

John said, moving forward to the stairs, "Why don't you take them up yourself?"

"Because my hand is otherwise occupied," Sargus snapped. "Watch those stairs. We go to the third floor."

They went up, John in the lead precariously holding the two trays, and Sargus keeping a good six steps behind him. They were long flights of stairs, stairs which John had never climbed before. They came to the second floor where Sargus ordered a turn to the left. Now the steps narrowed. John's thoughts flew as he went upward. Was this the time, or would it be best to wait until they should come to their destination? Should he whirl about suddenly, or wait for a more opportune time?

Sargus snapped, "My finger is on the trigger. One false move and—"

He said no more. The decision was made for John, made by something as simple as one of the leather laces of the moccasins. The lace had come undone and John had stepped on it. Before he himself knew what was happening, he came hurtling down upon Sargus, crashing against the narrow way. The man behind him was thrust against the wall.

The gun flew from his grasp and by a miracle it did not go off. There was only the crash of the trays, the thud of their bodies, and then a small quiet, in which John recovered first.

When they continued on their upward way, John held the revolver; Sargus, minus his hat, the ugly scar showing lividly in his dark face, walked with a painful limp.

John did not need to ask which door would lead to Mr. Nuhart's rooms, which to Leetha's. He could hear them plainly. They were calling to Bert Oberg, to Dud, asking what had happened, who had been hurt.

John followed the sound of their voices down a winding hallway, leading toward the back of the house. He said, so they could hear, "It's all right. I'm a friend. I'll let you out."

The keys were in the dark man's mackinaw pocket. John had the man open the heavy padlocks which barred the doors. He saw that an elderly-looking man who might have been a professor came from the one opened door, and that a girl with silvery-blond hair and wide brown eyes came from the other. But he was principally occupied with binding and gagging his captive.

It was no simple task. Sargus fought like a wild thing. And John became conscious of a twinge in his left shoulder, where he must have smashed

against the wall. His head was pounding again.

But he was not without assistance. If he had formed any picture of Leetha, it was of a girl who was utterly helpless, fragile, but this was not so. Slender capable hands kept supplying him with long silken cords, a length of satin ribbon. Between the two of them, they managed very well. Sargus was trussed and pushed under the high bed in Mr. Nuhart's room. It was a long room with an archway. John glimpsed a smaller compartment, shelves upon shelves of books, leather chairs. A room to think in, but there was no time for thought now. They must act, and quickly.

John heard the girl saying, "You're John, aren't you? You came from the Hayfords—?"

John said, "Yes, I'm John." And in a brief and brilliantly clear moment, he saw the two of them. The old man was a scholarly man whom no one could have called handsome and yet whose rugged features drew John's instant admiration. Mr. Nuhart might have been sixty years old. His hair, growing straight back from an extremely high forehead, was gray and coarse. He was taller than John had expected, wearing a black suit with a tailor-made look. Leetha, at his side, was dressed more in keeping with the rugged old house. The silvery curls fell to shoulders encased in brown corduroy. Her slacks were of the same material.

A clock could not have ticked more than ten times, and yet the bond between them had been signed and sealed, the bond of friendship and of trust. John felt himself straighten. Strength seemed to come pulsing into his veins. He said again, "Yes, I'm John," but it was more to himself.

He was John Payne, not a benumbed creature, a pitiful caricature of a man to be beaten, bandied, bullied. There was no world of doubt and fear about him, unless he would acknowledge it, let it wear him down. Alfred Borton was a man of flesh and blood, and so were all his followers. Might had been on their side, but right was with John. He had been a fool to let himself be duped into a foggy submission.

Action! That was it. He would fight his way out. The threat that lay over the heads of the helpless ones would not be lessened if he waited for time to pass. Rather, time would be lost and the danger to them made the greater.

He would fight back. With the last remaining ounce of his strength he would battle the white-faced man and whatever it was he stood for.

He was, to his last breath, John Payne.

He must have looked formidable. Leetha's hand was on his arm. Her eyes, wide, looked into his face. "I heard you—through the clothes chute," her voice came breathlessly. "Was Old Gran hurt?"

"No—not badly." John moved toward the door.

"We'll go on down. Take something warm with you."

Lyman Nuhart said, "Yes. Yes, something warm." His voice was deep, alive with the prospect of freedom. But he could not move as swiftly as Leetha. It was the girl who seemed to make the coats materialize out of thin air. The two had what would be needed for the outdoors, thick fur for the old man, a short woolen jacket and a scarf for the girl. John had the key ready to lock the door as they stepped into the hall, when he saw Dud. The boy was standing on the stairs, and his voice came in a whisper.

"John—!"

"What is it, Dud?"

"The buzzer is working in the study!"

The buzzer was working in the study. Alfred Borton was checking in from the Hill House. Engler might be the one he expected to answer it—or Sargus.

John said swiftly, "Where's Engler?"

"Outside. He didn't hear the crash. I've been standing guard on second floor."

So it was Sargus who was expected to take the call, Sargus who lay bound and gagged under Lyman Nuhart's high bed.

John turned the key in the lock. He said to Leetha, "Go on down to the kitchen. I'll answer that call."

CHAPTER NINE

THE SECRET WAY

Noiselessly, swiftly, John sped down the stairs, sidestepping the clutter of cracked chinaware and food where the trays had fallen. He did not pause until he came to the second floor landing and then only for an instant, to push the loose leather thong inside the top of one moccasin, lest he slip again when his footing must be secure.

There was a railing from the second to the first floor. John's hand skimmed along its smooth surface. Where the stairs branched, going to the front hallway and to the back door, John chose the latter way. He had not come up here, but he sensed that it might be closer to the study, and it was.

Crossing the lounge with the great pointed windows, the sound of the buzzer came, insistently. Following it, John went into the smaller room. It was a miniature of the greater lounge, with a fireplace across one corner. The buzzing noise seemed to come from a cabinet on the wall at the right. John pulled the small door open, saw the mouthpiece and the hook where the earphone hung. He lifted it, took a breath and sought to conjure up the

face of the man with the scar. His voice, when he spoke, was not an expert imitation of Sargus's, but it had his quality. If there were a password, John could not know it, and on the spur of the moment, it seemed the wisest course to speak as was the truth, admitting his sudden flight from the third floor.

He said, breathlessly, "Yes—yes. Sargus speaking—!"

Alfred Borton said, querulously, "Where were you? What took you so long?"

"On the third floor. A little trouble. But everything is in hand now." He recalled quickly that Sargus was not eager to attend to the wants of the prisoners. "Am I free to leave now?" he said, sullenly.

"No." Alfred Borton must have come closer to the mouthpiece in the Hill House. His voice had a metallic tone. Perhaps John's did also, to the secretary's ears. At any rate, he seemed to have passed successfully as Sargus. He heard a short whispered conversation, then the secretary spoke again, "Stay where you are. Watch the dining hall. Engler is going back to the rear hallway."

John said, "Very well." There was a click in his ear which meant that Alfred Borton had hung up his receiver, and with a flagging feeling of relief, John did likewise.

As he turned to leave, he saw the girl standing in the entrance, her eyes waiting.

John told her, "It's all right. He thought I was Sargus."

"Oh—that's good!" She stepped back into the great lounge room. John came to her side, taking her arm.

"But Engler's at the back. He might come in at any moment. You should have waited in the kitchen." He propelled her across the room, toward the back hallway. But Leetha stopped suddenly.

"I wanted to talk to you first. There's something —important. If Dud knows, he'll want to go, too—and he should stay with them."

They were before the fireplace. Only embers were there, but warmth still came with the faded fire. There was fire in the girl's eyes, too, and John thought fleetingly that she seemed anything but a frail, helpless girl. She was wearing her coat, and John soon discovered the reason.

He said, "If Dud knows what?"

"That there's a secret passageway to the Hill House."

"Oh," John's brows lifted. "Is there?"

"I think so. I'm almost positive. We always said there must be, and we tried to find it. Dud finally gave up. At least he said it was a waste of time to go on looking."

John prodded her, "Yes—?"

"Well, I think I found it, last night. I knew Dud was planning to wash today, and I was going to help.

He forgets to wipe off the pipes in the drying room. I went down to get things ready."

She was taking up too much time. John said, "And you found the passageway?"

"I think so. I slipped, and I fell against the wall, back of the pipes. I must have hit some—some spring or something. The wall moved inward. We—we never looked there before. We always thought if there was a passageway, it would lead from the cellar apartment. That's the nearest point to the Hill House."

John took her arm and started across the room, toward the rear hallway. "All right," he said, "I'll go down and see." The back door was in sight. It was closed. Engler must still be outside. He pushed the girl toward the door leading to the kitchen. "You wait in there with them."

"Oh—no!" John felt her arm stiffen. "I'm going, too!"

"But—?"

"You'd lose time trying to find it. You haven't been in the cellar, have you?"

"No, but—"

"I'm going." It was definite. "If we find a way out, I can come back and get the others, or you can come back. Anyway, there'll be two of us. Besides—what can I do here? I can't stand waiting any longer! I won't, I tell you!"

"All right, all right!" John soothed. But he was thinking of the gun that had belonged to Sargus and which now rested in his own hip pocket. Lyman Nuhart and the others would not be alone—with that.

He stopped at the back door. "Wait here," he told the girl. "I'll leave this," he took out the revolver, "with Dud. Call me if you see Engler coming."

The girl murmured something and took her stand at the door. John rushed on into the kitchen. He saw the three of them standing near Old Gran's room, before her door which was closed. Dud seemed to spring forward.

"You got by all right," he said, "didn't you?" He motioned toward the window which looked out upon the back slopes. "No one's come from the Hill House. Engler's still out there."

John nodded, and heard Bert Oberg's rumbling voice. "By golly, John, you had us scared stiff. We thought you got killed at first. But Mr. Nuhart says Sargus is safe—for a while."

"Yes, he's safe."

"Where's Miss Leetha?"

John motioned backward. "In the hall." And he quickly rearranged his plan. He gave Bert Oberg the gun. "You keep this, Oberg. Leetha and I are going down in the cellar."

"The cellar!" Bert Oberg's tone was sharp. He

took the gun, but his eyes held to John's face.

Lyman Nuhart said, "Don't you think we'd better stay here, together? If Leetha—?"

"I'll take care of her, Mr. Nuhart. We—we think there might be a way out—."

Dud broke in, "Did she find the secret passage?"

Someone echoed, "Secret passage!" but John thought he detected a sound of footsteps on the back porch.

"We'll be back—soon!" He stepped toward the door. He said to Bert Oberg, "Keep Mr. Nuhart out of sight. And you stay behind the door, here. If Engler comes in, you'll be ready for him. Tie him up and hide him in Gran's room." He was out in the hallway, closing the door. "Good luck," he said and he sounded cheerful in his own ears. Then he was at Leetha's side and the girl was pointing to a narrow entrance-way. John pushed the door open and saw the stone steps leading downward. Darkness shrouded all but the first four of the steps and he looked about for a light.

"Wait!" Leetha's hand went to the shelf on the wall. "Here's a flashlight," she said. "Better let me go first."

John flattened himself against the stairway wall and the girl went on ahead. Her feet, in thick-soled brown oxfords, seemed to dance over the beam of the flash. The light made a curve and John saw that

the stairway turned abruptly to the right. From above came the muted sound of moving feet, perhaps as Bert Oberg took his place behind the door, making himself ready for Engler. It was a consolation, knowing that his friends would be ready, that Lyman Nuhart had been removed from his prison, and was now with them.

If all went well—and why shouldn't it?—Engler would be taken, as Sargus had been taken. Alfred Borton might remain in the Hill House for some time, might not call in again to the Nest. He was nervous, worried. He was facing some unforeseen development in his plans. He would probably be busy, too busy to find out what was happening here. There would be time enough to find the entrance to the secret passageway, perhaps to get Lyman Nuhart, all of them, to safety.

If Leetha were right. If there were a secret passageway, and if it led to freedom—

They went down, down. The smell of soapsuds came to John, and they stood in a narrow passageway. To the left was a closed door. To the right was an open way, wide. John could see the mounds of white clothes, the smaller hill of dark wearing apparel, the washing machine, two tubs.

Leetha pointed toward the closed door at the left.

"That goes to the cellar apartment. It's one big room. We used to have it for a sort of a game room,

"Go Ahead," He Urged. "Push on the Wall."

but Alfred's got it locked now. I think one of his men sleeps in there, maybe two of them."

"And that's the closest point to the Hill House?"

"Yes. There's a smaller room leading from it, a kind of dungeon—at least, we call it the dungeon. It might have been meant for a wine cellar. We thought a secret door might lead from there—but we never found one." She started toward the washing room, but the light in her hand struck against the intervening wall. There was a wooden door and Leetha pushed it open. John saw another passage yawning ahead.

Leetha went ahead, sent the beam of light briefly to the right.

"The furnace is in there," she said, and dismissed that area. "We go this way." Another wooden door led them to the high narrow room where pipes ran the length of one wall. "This is the drying room," Leetha said, and her voice lowered to a husky whisper. "I found the opening there," she pointed. "Back of those pipes."

John closed the wooden door, held out his hand for the flashlight.

"Go ahead," he urged. "Push on the wall like you did before."

He stepped backward, holding the beam for the girl, and did not observe his own footing, until he felt the hard edge of rock cutting into his moc-

casins. The floor was of stone slabs, the intervening crevices poorly filled with ancient, crumbling cement. John moved to one of the smoother stones, watching the girl's hands, pushing, prodding between the rows of coils.

But there was no opening space in the wall. No entrance appeared. He heard her murmur, "I know it opened! I saw it!" But minutes passed and John's uneasiness grew.

He said, "It was last night, you say, when you found the opening?"

"Yes. Last night." She turned to him and her eyes were deep pools of consternation. One slender white hand brushed back the silvery hair, then went to the high collar of her coat, pulling it away as though it choked her. "But I can't find it now. I—I can't find it!"

"Take it easy," John advised, swallowing his own misgivings. "Try to think back, Leetha. Tell me just how it was."

"How it was—?" The girl looked about her. "Why, I came down here to wipe off the pipes. I had a cloth, and I was pressing pretty hard. I slipped and hit the wall. And it opened. I know it did, John! You believe me, don't you?"

John nodded reassuringly. "Of course. And then what? What happened after that?"

"After that?"

"Yes. Did you go right upstairs?"

"No. No, I didn't. I thought I heard Dud in the washing room and I was going in there—to tell him. But someone was in the cellar apartment. I—well, all of a sudden I got panicky. I rushed up the stairs and when I came to the back hall I saw the telephone. No one was around. I called long distance. I called the Hayfords. I wanted to talk to Mrs. Parker."

"And then—?" John urged her.

"Then—then Alfred came out of the study. He pulled me away from the telephone. I don't know what I said. I meant to ask her to come—I wanted her so!" She had a lovely mouth. Even when she sought to keep back her tears and the lips trembled, she was a pretty little thing.

"Poor kid!" John thought. "She muddled things, all right."

Leetha shared his thought. "Wasn't it silly?" she flared. "Just when I'd found out—to try and get Mrs. Parker? I might have known Alfred would have stopped me. He locked us both up then, grandfather and I. I didn't have a chance to tell Dud. I didn't want to write *that* in a note and send it down the chute. If they found *that* out—!"

"Listen," John's hand was on her arm. He thought he had caught the sound of a door opening from overhead, the sound of footsteps. They both

paused, straining to hear.

But the house was still. If Engler had come in, there would have been the sound of the scuffle.

Thus far, all was well. They might return to the kitchen, await their chance with the others, hope to escape together some other way.

But John's thought took another channel.

"When you left here, did you shut the opening again, Leetha?"

"Did I shut it—?" Her eyes were wide with fear now. "No, no I didn't shut it, John. It—it must have shut itself!"

"Unless," John thought, "unless someone saw you—came in here after you had left and closed the secret opening." But he did not say this. He did not want even to think it. Almost brusquely, he gave the girl the light. "I'll try my luck, Leetha," he said. "You hold that thing on the spot where you think the wall opened. If we don't find it—!"

"Then what, John?"

"Then we'll hit back for the kitchen. Figure out something else. Come on, now, hold that light still."

The beam held against the wall, against the rough stony stuff that formed the structure. John pressed about, using his fingertips, then the palms of his hands. Nothing happened. The wall remained a solid blank. He stepped backward, and one foot slid off the edge of a rough stone. There came a little

clinking noise as the stone moved, but more than the stone moved under his foot. The wall behind the pipes went slowly inward!

Leetha said, "Look, John. Look!"

"I see it. It's opening, Leetha. You were right!"

"I knew it. Oh, I knew it."

"But it was the *stone,* the stone you *stepped* on. See?"

Leetha shot the beam of the light downward. Together, they bent and examined the slab. It came out. And underneath it was a round black knob. This must be the pressure point of some kind of spring.

John glanced upward, toward the wall.

It was closed.

"See, Leetha? It closed itself. When you were standing here, you must have dislodged this stone, stepped on the spring. You stepped off, and it shut again."

"I see!"

John came quickly to his feet.

"It's pretty safe to say no one knows about this." He looked at her closely. "Funny you never found it before, isn't it?"

"We don't use this room much. Mrs. Parker didn't like it. She used to put up lines," Leetha pointed toward the washing room, "in there. In nice weather, she put the clothes outdoors."

John only half heard her. Over the murmur of her voice, he was listening again for a sound from above. All was still. For an uncertain moment he struggled with a decision. Should he go up and bring the others down here? Would it be better for them to wait here in the drying room while he explored the passage, while he and Leetha explored it? For the girl would insist on going with him.

It might have been the wisest course, had it not been for Old Gran. She would be overwhelmed by the strangeness. She would whimper.

No. He and Leetha must search the passageway first, search and hope that there would be time to bring all the rest to safety.

John stood on the spring. The door opened. He told Leetha, "Push it in."

The girl did so, and held it open while John replaced the stone. He crossed around, behind the pipes. Standing with his back against the inner door, bracing one foot against it, he in turn held it open for Leetha to come around the row of coils to his side.

It was not a large opening, not more than four feet high, perhaps two feet across. John had the flashlight and he cast it into the black hole of the passageway. From where they stood, it appeared that sawed off timbers stood like grim and silent guards as far as the eye could reach. Lengths of rough logs

made the ceiling overhead, and it appeared that only the bare earth made the floor. Cold came out at them, surrounded them, and an indescribably dreary odor, the complaint of damp earth that had never known the sun.

Reluctantly, John inhaled. He said, "If this goes as far as the Hill House, we'll have to move fast."

"I'm sure it does!" Leetha said quickly. "I said all along that the man who built Hawk's Nest must have been afraid of something. He must have been—to put the scroll-work on all the windows. It—it always seemed that there must be a passage to the Hill House."

"Ummm," John murmured. He let the girl come all the way inside, but kept his foot braced against the door, keeping it open. "We'll see how this works from the inside," he said.

Leetha pointed. "There's a bar there, John. See? It crosses over the opening—,"

"And fits down in a slot," John finished. "You lift it up, and pull it open." He let the door swing shut. "Well, that's that."

"Yes," Leetha whispered, her eyes fixed on the place where the door had opened. John looked at her intently.

"Want to go back?"

"Go back? Where?"

"The drying room—or the kitchen. You could

wait there."

"No! I told you I was going with you!"

"Okay." John took her arm, and they turned toward the blackness ahead. They had to stoop as they went forward, but after about twelve feet, the walls heightened. John's head was completely clear of the beamed ceiling.

"That's better," he said. "We can make time now."

Leetha murmured, "Yes, much better," and a choking, strangling sound seemed wrenched from her throat.

John stopped. "What's the matter?"

"Something hit my face! Like—like a spider web!"

"Maybe it was." John thought he saw something, a dark lizard-like creature, scuttle in the blackness ahead. "No telling what we'll run into here, Leetha. Better put your scarf over your face."

It was around her neck, tied in a knot. Without stopping, the girl slipped the cloth up over her chin. Then they moved forward more quickly, but came to an abrupt halt when the tunnel took a sharp, left hand turn.

"Say—!" John exploded. "Where's this thing leading us! We better get our bearings, Leetha."

The girl considered the place where they stood. Looking upward, she puzzled over the first floor plan of the house, fought to picture the room overhead.

Then her fingers bit into John's arm.

"We're under the archway, John. I'll bet anything! And I'll bet, if we look around here, we'll find another door. Hurry! Turn the flash this way!" The scarf had come down from her face and John saw the eager excitement glowing there. Obediently, he turned the light where she wished, against the place where the wall turned. Almost instantly they saw the second slot, with a bar like the one they had closed behind them.

Leetha gloated, "You see? Didn't I tell you?"

"All right, you told me. Now, where does it lead?"

"Into Gran's room. You know where Old Gran is, off the kitchen?"

"Sure I know. But what makes you think so?"

"Think? Oh, John, I know!" Her fingers were biting into his arm again. "You've seen that rug on the floor in her room? Well, there's a trap door under that rug. It leads down to a little cellar. We never knew why it was there, but don't you see, John? This door off the passage here must lead to that little cellar. It's another way out!"

"Humm," John said. "Does Gran know the trap door's there?"

"Maybe. She finds everything. But it's nailed down—to be sure."

John said, "I see. Well, it's good to know—in case."

Leetha said suddenly, "Let's open this door, John —in case."

John looked ahead, back to her. "All right," he agreed and pushed up on the bar. It gave more easily than he had expected.

"There!" Leetha approved, and reached for her scarf. Before the lovely lips were covered, John saw her smile. "Aren't you glad I came?"

"Very glad," John said. "Now let's get going— before we choke."

Little was said as they resumed their way. The passage kept its height and bore ahead in a straight, narrow avenue. But they knew they were moving downward. The earth was not firmly packed. Here and there were sharp stones of which Leetha might be unaware, but which cut into John's moccasined feet. He kept his eyes downward, as well as ahead, searching the path before them.

When they came at last to the termination of the passage, the dead wall ahead was almost a surprise. John said, holding Leetha back, "Do you think we've come as far as the Hill House?"

"Oh, yes. Yes, I'm sure of it." She was out of breath, almost gasping. Her eyes above the scarf were bright. "We made it, John!"

John had the flashlight trained on the wall before them. There was another slot, another bar, like the two they had found before.

"Take this," John gave the light to the girl. "We'll see where this gets us."

The wooden bar felt slippery in his hands, but it raised with little difficulty. John said, "Well, here we go," and pushed on the door. It gave way almost too quickly. Their ears caught the sound of a sharp crack and, close upon it, what seemed to their unsuspecting ears, a thunderburst of noise. China cracked, and tins rattled.

They stood for a moment transfixed, incapable of movement. Then John leaped backward, pulled the door in place. His heart was like a trip-hammer against his ribs. He looked down at the girl, and she stared blankly up into his face. John heard his own voice, huskily.

"Now what?"

Leetha shook her head. The scarf over her lips moved. John heard her whisper, "I don't know. Oh, John, I'm afraid!"

That steadied him. "Don't be." He took the hand she put gropingly toward him. "Maybe it's not as bad as we think."

The girl shook her head again. She thought, as John did, that if they had come to the Hill House, they had certainly made their presence known to Alfred Borton, to whatever persons were with him.

John said, "I wonder what we hit?"

"I—I don't know."

"Well, if they heard us, we'll soon find out. We'll have to wait and see."

"Yes," the girl whispered. "We'll have to wait—and see."

It seemed an eternity, but it could have been only a matter of seconds before John caught the dull beat of feet overhead. The beating came louder, nearer. There was, perhaps, no need of it, but John let his finger slip over the clasp of the flash. Instantly, they were plunged into total darkness. John put one hand about the girl's shaking shoulders.

"Easy," he whispered. "Take it easy, now."

But the girl's trembling only increased. A muffled, choking sound came through the blackness. John realized with a sense of panic that she was crying.

"Leetha, be quiet!"

"Oh, it's all my fault!" she was sobbing. "If anything happens to you, it's all my fault."

"For heaven's sake, girl, be still!"

"I—I can't! I got you into this. If—if I'd called the sh-sheriff, or the W-Woods, you wouldn't be here. Maybe we'd all be s-saved by now!"

John shook her. The flash was in one of his hands, and the thing must have pushed into her arm. But the steps were treacherously near. There were voices, too. This was no time for a case of jitters.

"Listen," he hissed quietly, close to her ear, "get a grip on yourself, girl. I was thinking what a brick

you were. Don't disappoint me. I'm having the time of my life, see? Wouldn't miss any of this—not on a bet."

She grew quieter. John's hold slackened. He felt a wave of pity for her. After all, she was only a kid. She'd been through a lot already. He said, calmly, "Atta girl. Now keep your ears open. And don't make a sound. Here they are!"

CHAPTER TEN

A DIVIDED DUTY

Even if John had not succeeded in calming the girl, if she had gone on sobbing, the little noise she made would have been drowned in the excited outburst which grew nearer, rose in volume from some place beyond them—no doubt the cellar of the Hill House. For, though walls separated them, John recognized the quality of Alfred Borton's speech, recognized it and, at the same time, marveled at the change that had come over the fellow. He was no longer the master of the situation. He had lost control, was almost babbling, a thin stiletto against the thrusts of a sharp broadsword of another voice, a voice which seemed to reverberate with deep, killing power. Nor were these two the only ones. Jabbing in, on the fringe of the fray, was a reedy, terrified cry and, it seemed, in the farthest background, there was a general, unnamable confusion.

About five men were somewhere beyond the wall, John guessed. Five men, but the one with the heavy, flat, rumbling voice was the voice of authority. That man was making the demands, asking the questions.

"What is the meaning of this, Borton? What has

happened here? What have you permitted to happen?"

John could almost picture Alfred Borton cringing.

"I don't know! I swear it! Nothing has happened. Nothing could have happened!"

"But you heard the sound! You heard it—we all heard it! Where did it come from?"

The babble rose, lessened. A new note sounded. "In there, it seemed to me. In the storeroom."

A door was opened. One of the containers which had fallen to the floor must have rested against the door, for there came the scraping of tin. Alfred Borton said, excitedly, "You see? That shelf gave way, that is all. There is no one here. You see for yourself the place is empty!"

"Empty, yes—now!"

"But who could have been here?" Alfred Borton persisted. "If anyone had come into this storeroom, we would have seen him. We would see him now. It is quite evident there is no one in there." He was talking fast and standing straighter, John guessed, gaining a measure of his assurance.

There was a small pause, in which the voices continued, muted.

The deep-voiced speaker said, "I don't like it."

Someone said, "A rat, perhaps. Are there rats in the place?"

"What Is the Meaning of This?" Demanded Havill

"Rats—!" the powerful one said, and there was no mistaking the thought he had in mind. "That is what I am wondering."

Alfred Borton's whine in his own defense began again, but John was drawn away from the voices for a moment. Leetha was tugging at his arm, whispering something. He leaned closer to her to hear.

"That's Alex Havill," she said. "I remember him."

"Alex Havill?" John tried to recall where he had heard the name. It had been here, or rather at Hawk's Nest. But he did not place it immediately.

Leetha went on, "Alfred said he was a friend of his. He came last summer to see Alfred." John thought she shuddered. "He's a dreadful looking man—fat, and his eyes are dead-looking!"

John remembered. Bert Oberg had said that Alex Havill had come to see the secretary. He had said that Alex Havill was a devil in human form, that after his visit, the secretary had changed.

Was Alex Havill, John wondered swiftly, the power from which the secretary drew his strength? Was he the source of the trouble that hung heavily over the Nest?

Certainly Alfred Borton feared him. And so, it seemed, did the others who were there. Leetha had seen two of them come today. She had written that on the note which she had dropped down the chute.

John whispered to the girl, "You saw two of 'em

coming here, didn't you?"

"Why—yes. Yes, I did."

"Was this Alex Havill one of them?"

"No. I don't think so. I'm sure he wasn't."

"Then," John said softly, "he must have come later. Because you were watching, weren't you?"

"Oh, yes. Whenever I could. I was listening at the chute, too,—to hear how you all were downstairs."

They lapsed into a listening silence again. The voices on the other side of the wall continued, and it seemed that they grew somewhat fainter, as though the speakers were moving away from the storeroom.

John could sense now that the secret door opened from behind a shelf, or probably shelves. The same method of concealment was used at both ends of the passageway, with the door behind the pipes at the Nest, behind another wall arrangement here. The walls must not be heavy, for sound carried through.

He whispered to Leetha, "You know where we are? Where this storeroom is?"

"Oh, yes. It's not a big cellar here."

"They seem to be going away. I can hardly hear 'em."

But Alex Havill was not going away. Perhaps he had not been entirely satisfied. Perhaps he was probing about, searching for a possible entrance to the cellar.

Leetha enlightened John on the subject. "There's the stairs going up—right over this room. And there's an outside cellar door. It goes to the back of the house, to the side road."

They both heard the creaking, the sudden scrape, and knew that the outside cellar door had been opened. The way it protested was proof that no one had entered there.

Alex Havill's rumble was heard again, and the door closed. The voices again drew closer.

Alfred Borton said, "You see, Mr. Havill. No one came in here."

"I see." But there was no satisfaction in the tone. Quite the reverse. "Borton, you have made several mistakes. Sending that housekeeper away was foolish and unnecessary."

"But I explained, Mr. Havill. She was becoming suspicious. And she was friendly with the neighbors."

"All the more reason why she should have been kept at Hawk's Nest!" Alex Havill snapped. "You sent her away—so she could talk elsewhere. So she could bring this—this—John Lane to the place."

John felt Leetha's hand tense on his forearm. His own hand shut down over her fingers, cautioning silence. They dared not miss one syllable of what was being said now.

"But he is harmless," Alfred Borton must have

endeavored a smile, must have shrugged. "With one blow Engler struck him senseless."

John heard his teeth grinding together as he listened.

Alfred Borton went on, "What harm can he do? When the Nest falls, so will he."

Alex Havill was by no means pacified. "It was necessary to send Deitz away wearing his clothes. It was—," he paused, and John guessed that the fat man's eyes were boring into the white face of Alfred Borton. "It was a waste, Borton. I lay it all to your greed."

"My—greed?" Alfred Borton seemed to flounder.

"Yes, your greed, your desire for mastery. You disliked the woman; it pleased you to remove her, and you did so." There came a gasp from the secretary, but he did not have a chance to speak. Alex Havill continued, "Your orders were expressly to call no attention to the place to do nothing out of the ordinary—except, perhaps, your appointed task —which, by the way, might have been handled with more talent."

Alfred Borton exploded, "But Mr. Havill, I managed that well. Even though the housekeeper left, she would never have spoken. She was filled with fear for the master. She believed that he lived in a constant dread. That I instilled. I worked, I schemed, I plotted. I made him believe he was pursued by

his partner, that he needed protection. So it was I kept the position as his bodyguard."

John felt Leetha moving. It seemed she would pull her hand away. Her breath caught on a sudden sob. John said, in her ear, "Don't you make a sound! Listen! Not a sound!"

Alex Havill said flatly, "I know all that."

"Then why do you accuse me of failure in my appointed task? I kept outsiders away from Hawk's Nest. I kept it secret, private, so our meetings could be held here in safety."

Alfred Borton paused, waiting evidently for some word of commendation. There was none and he plunged on, "Doffer here understands what is required of him. He is ready, waiting for the word—aren't you?"

A voice, the reedy note John had first heard when the men came into the cellar, grew out of the farther room.

"I understand. And I am ready." The man sounded very old, or very tired. And again, John felt Leetha's hand tugging at his arm.

"That's Mr. Doffer!" she said in shocked surprise. "He's from town. Why—I didn't know!"

John said, "I remember. Bert Oberg told me Borton was hobnobbing with him." He patted Leetha's hand, cautioning silence. "Listen."

Alex Havill must have smiled. He said, "Yes, I am

sure Mr. Doffer understands what is expected of him. You have a brother, haven't you, Doffer, a brother who is still overseas? You would not want anything—unpleasant—to happen to that brother."

The old man said again, with pitiful patience, "I told you, I know what you want. I am ready to do as you say."

"Yes, you are ready." Alex Havill's voice rose. "Everything is ready. It is a difficult, a highly delicate task. It is no ordinary paper we wish to print. On the surface, it is innocent, harmless. But the message is there. The message of the new order, the new command. It must be handled subtly. In time, we will blast the rule, but that time is not now. Not yet. Now all must be patience, quiet, secret preparation." There came a sudden sound, as though a great fist had banged against wood and Alex Havill's voice thundered, "And what have you done, Borton? Have you moved in quiet, in secrecy? No, you have not. You have called unnecessary attention to yourself, when you were but a figurehead. You have been the cause of bringing in an outsider—!"

"But, Mr. Havill, the woman would not have spoken. She feared—!"

"Whatever she feared, you had no right to let her go. If anything, she should have been forced to stay." The voice lowered, softened, and it was deathly in its intensity. "What you did not know, Borton, and

what I shall tell you now, is this—Hawk's Nest was to have been the spot of our operations. We had intended to release Mr. Nuhart from his fear, to tell him in some way that his partner wished him no ill. He would be gone from here, and all with him. The place would have been ideal for our purpose."

Alfred Borton said, "I did not know that."

"Nor did you need to know. Obedience is your only law. You put yourself on too high a pedestal, Borton. You may find coming down from it most uncomfortable."

There was silence, out of which grew a murmur. Then Alex Havill spoke again. "All that is past. We live in the present moment, and plan again for the future. You, Thorn and Roval, go to the meeting place and wait for us. We will follow, Doffer, Borton and I."

Alfred Borton said, "What about Sargus and Engler?"

"They'll come. First of all we have a task to perform. We must set fire to Hawk's Nest. Everything and everyone in it must perish."

The secretary gasped. "But that is impossible—!"

"Impossible? I think not. You have gasoline. Signal Engler. Get to work. We have no time to lose."

Mr. Doffer said, "But what do they know? What could they tell? Why can't we go away—?"

Alex Havill shouted something at the old man.

John did not hear what it was. Searing his thought was the news of what would happen to Hawk's Nest.

They were going to burn the place. They were going to signal to Engler. The flat-nosed man must still be guarding the rear of the house, the outside. But as soon as he would be summoned, he would go into the house. The others would probably follow him, Alex Havill, Alfred Borton, and Mr. Doffer. The other two, the two Leetha had seen coming here, Thorn and Roval, they would be out of the picture. They were going ahead to some "meeting place."

The thing to do first was to get the four who waited in the kitchen to a place of safety. Bert Oberg might overpower Engler, but Alex Havill and Alfred Borton might mean too much for him. Dud would help, but Dud was only a lad.

Every second counted now. John knew he must rush back through the dark passage, get those who waited, and return here, to this spot. Beyond that, he did not think.

But there was Sargus. Alfred Borton would expect to see the man with the scar. Not seeing him, nor getting any response to his call, he would look for the fellow. That would mean time for them, time for John to bring his friends to safety.

Alex Havill might then go free. He would leave, flee the place. And his plan would continue to operate elsewhere. Burning in John's heart came the

determination to outwit the plotters, to kill this evil. Alex Havill and all he stood for must perish.

It could be done, but alone he could not accomplish the divided duty. If Leetha—!

She was standing at his side, motionless. Her face was behind the scarf. John heard her breathing.

But the sounds from beyond the wall grew once again. Alex Havill was saying, "Take the car you used, Thorn. We will follow in the black sedan."

A low murmur gave assent and the voices began to move away.

John thought, "The black sedan. They have a car waiting at the back, on the side road. The outside cellar door leads to the side road."

He gripped Leetha's arm.

"Leetha! Listen, there's a job waiting for you—!" But he stopped, for the girl gave a low, stifled cry and slowly crumpled, falling in a heap at his feet.

John reached down, caught at the woolen stuff of her coat. "Leetha!" he whispered frantically, and his hands found the scarf about her face. He pulled it away, got one hand back of the girl's head. It moved listlessly under his palm and his own head, as he bent downwards, began to throb. He heard a distant rush that came and went, as though a wind blew far away, blew and receded, blew and receded.

"I'm going under," he thought, and the wind seemed to gather into a gale, to press down. John's

hand groped for the wall, but it must have been the door which he found. There was the bolt, the wooden bar which had slipped back into place. With a desperate effort, he gathered his failing energy. He knew that he must open the door, that it was the dank air of the passage that was beating them. Perhaps Alex Havill and his followers were still outside the door, in the cellar. Perhaps the roaring sound was their footsteps, their voices. John did not know, nor in that moment, did he care. Before all else, he and Leetha must have air to breathe.

He got on one knee, lifted the bar, and pressed carefully against the door. It gave, slightly. Some light entered the passage, and the healing relief of being able to fill his lungs gave John new hope. They were still underground, still in the cellar, but this was better by far than the tunnel.

For a moment John listened, coming slowly to his feet, keeping the door open only about six inches. He could hear the voices still, and the sounds on the stairs overhead. The two had not gone as yet to their car. They were still talking to Alex Havill.

Bending swiftly, John put his hand under the girl's shoulders. With scant ceremony, he shook her. "Leetha! Leetha, we've got work to do. You can't give up now. Come on, that's a good girl."

She *was* a good girl. Obediently, she opened her eyes, stared unseeing into John's face. She could only

see him dimly, nevertheless, recollection came swiftly enough. "John," she said. "I—I choked."

"So did I. Now, get up. Hurry! We've got to get out of here." As he spoke, he found the flashlight. He shot the beam on the floor, keeping an arm around the girl. Unsteadily, she came to her feet.

John said, "Easy now. We're going out into this fruit cellar. We can't afford to have any more jars or cans falling on our heads."

Leetha seemed to wake up. She whispered, "Have they gone, John? No, they haven't. I hear them!"

"They're going." John looked out through the partly open door. He saw that the row of shelves was perilously close. He could not open the door wide enough to permit himself to slip through, not without creating another commotion.

But Leetha was small. Leetha could slip through. And, after all, it was her job—that part of it.

John put her nearest to the opening. "Now, listen," he said. "Two of them are going. Then the rest of 'em are heading for the house. As soon as they leave here, you go out the cellar door, head for their car. Drain the gas out of their tank. You know how to do that?"

"Why, yes. I mean, it depends—"

"Good. You do it. If the keys are in the car, get them. The idea is to put that sedan out of commission. Then come back here. Slip into this passage

again. Don't close the door all the way, unless they come after you. We haven't time to find the way to open it from the other side." She looked a little blank. John said, "You get it?"

"Why, yes. I should put their car out of commission and come back here. Will you wait here?"

"Wait! Heck, no. I'm going to make a dash for the house, going to get the rest of them and bring them here."

"Bring them here? *Why*, John?"

Minutes were passing. The men were talking overhead, and as yet the two had not left. But there was no time to waste.

John said swiftly, "Because I think it'll be safer for them in here. If Borton should set fire to the house, they'll be safe here."

"Oh!" Leetha gasped. "That's what he said, didn't he? Oh, John—do you think you can make it?"

"I've got to. Walking's slower in the snow than down here. I can run through the tunnel." He patted her arm. "Don't worry about my part. You take care of that car."

"I will. Oh, I will! Hurry, John!"

But he was already on his way. It was safe to believe that the girl would do her share. Fear for her dear ones had outweighed her own terror. Thinking of them would buck her up.

The passageway went upward now. It was no less

slippery than it had been a short while ago, but John knew where it led. He knew where the sharp turn came. That was the spot which led to the space under Old Gran's room. He came to the turning place, ran on. The flashlight struck straight ahead and John kept his thoughts there, ahead, on the task before him.

Engler could not have made it to the house this fast. He could not run like this through the snow. John had come to the room with the pipes before Engler could know what had happened.

His hopes went ahead, and John's moccasined feet followed like soft heartbeats. He reached the drying room, opened the door behind the pipes. Slipping through, he placed the flashlight down at the bottom of the door, to hold it open. Then, gathering his breath, he rushed ahead, through the open wooden door, up the stairs, to the kitchen.

"It's John," he said, panting outside the door. "Everything's okay." The door was thrust open and he saw Dud standing at the kitchen sink. The boy was making a pretense of taking a drink of water. His eyes went to John's face, wide, questioning.

John told him swiftly, "Dud, we found the secret passageway."

"Y-You did?"

"Listen—it leads from the drying room, from behind the pipes—"

Bert Oberg had been standing behind the door. He came to John's side.

"What passageway, John?" he said. "What is this—?"

"I haven't time to tell you. Get down there—as fast as you can! Follow the passage. I have the flashlight stuck in the door so it'll stay open. Shut the door after you."

The door of Old Gran's room had opened. Lyman Nuhart stood there, looking fixedly at John. "You found a passage?" he asked.

John said, motioning to Bert Oberg, "Dud will show you. Get something warm to wear. Hurry, for the love of heaven!"

It was Dud who rushed from the kitchen, returned in a minute. He had coats for himself and Bert Oberg. Lyman Nuhart had retrieved his own coat from the dark room.

John urged them on again. "Lead the way, Dud. Follow the passage. It leads to the cellar in the Hill House. Leetha's there now."

Dud, at the door, turned. "What about you? Aren't you coming?"

"Sure. I'll bring Old Gran. Go on! Engler might come in here at any moment!"

"Engler!" Lyman Nuhart was at John's side. He motioned toward the back window, the one above the small table. "I've been watching from there. I

saw him—just before you came in, John. He must have received a signal. He went toward the Hill House, but then I thought he came back here—!"

John almost pushed the master of the house out through the kitchen door. Dud was down the cellar steps and Lyman Nuhart followed. Bert Oberg lingered for an agonizing moment. "My mother—?" he said.

"I'll bring her." John motioned toward the dark room. "She in there?"

"Yes. She's sleeping."

"I'll carry her down. Get going, Bert. Shut that door after you. I know how to open it again."

Bert Oberg did not want to leave. John almost snarled, "You have a duty to Dud, too—and to Mr. Nuhart. Don't worry. I'll bring Old Gran."

The old man sighed from the depths of his soul.

"All right," he said and thrust the revolver into John's hands. "Put that where it won't show."

He went out the door, after the others. Their steps retreated, were lost. All was quiet. As yet, Engler had not come in.

John sped across the kitchen to Old Gran's room. The revolver, where it would not show, went only one place, inside the heavy shirt he was wearing. The pullover sweater bulged around his waist where there was a thick fold. Unless one knew he carried the gun, it might well go unnoticed.

"I'll Carry Her Down," He Said

In the farther bed, against the wall, John saw the little old lady. There was a crack in the green shade over a high window and a slender thread of light showed her face above a faded blue comforter, quiet, peaceful.

John could not call out to her, she would not hear him. Nor could she see him, even though he wakened her. And yet, when he lifted her, she must not whimper, must not lead the searchers to the dark room. A minute taken now, John realized, might mean a later gain of hours, and so he advanced gently to her side, took one of her hands.

It did little good, but he murmured, "It's John, Gran. It's John. Your friend—not a stranger."

Her eyes opened, and John thought that she not only saw him, but through him. She said querulously, "What time is it? Leave me be."

Her hand sought to press him aside, away, but John held the small fingers firmly, stroking them. He knelt at the bedside, put her fingers on his head as he had done before. It seemed that she murmured, "The boy. It is the nice boy," but whatever it was she said, she spoke quietly, reassured. She seemed to sense, too, that she must get up, and when John put his hand behind her shoulders, she allowed herself to be helped to a sitting position.

"It's all right, Gran," John whispered. "We're going to take a little trip, you and I. And we'll have

to hurry." His ears strained to catch any sounds from the back of the house. He heard the outer door open, the babble of voices.

Alex Havill must be in the lead. He was there, so was Alfred Borton and Engler, too. They had all come together. If old Mr. Doffer were there, he made no sound.

John forced himself to remain quiet, to think. If they did not come directly to the kitchen, or to this room, if they scattered over the house, there was a chance that he might slip down the cellar steps unnoticed. He must be ready, the moment they moved away, to make a run for the drying room.

The men came nearer. John heard the kitchen door open. He thought, "Something to keep the old lady warm," and the comforter around her seemed the answer. He put it around her shoulders and, hoping against hope that she would make no protest, he gathered her, a light enough bundle, in his arms.

"Now what under the sun are you doing?" she said, not loudly, not frightened, almost a little amused.

"She knows me anyhow," John told himself. "And she's not scared. If only she keeps still—."

But there was noise enough in the kitchen to drown out Gran's small chatter. John guessed that Alex Havill must be standing in the doorway. He heard the deep voice, "They're not in here. Borton.

You go upstairs. Engler, look in their bedroom. You, Doffer, come into the study with me."

John was holding the bundled-up figure, unconsciously rocking his arms slightly as one consoles a little child. Not that Old Gran needed consolation. She seemed content. John heard something like a chuckle of enjoyment. But there was no relief in the situation for him. He was keyed to the highest pitch, waiting, listening. Gingerly, he moved toward the door which would take them into the kitchen.

He thought swiftly, "They're upstairs, in Bert Oberg's quarters, in the study. The way to the cellar door is clear. It's got to be clear."

He reached with one hand, opened the door of the dark room, and came into the kitchen. From various directions were sounds of movement. Someone, Alfred Borton, perhaps, was calling to Sargus. But no one was in sight.

John gathered Old Gran close to him, took a deep breath and made a run for the door to the back hallway.

He did not reach it.

High and thin, coming from the pantry-way, he heard Engler's voice.

"What's your hurry?"

CHAPTER ELEVEN

A LITTLE SHARP KNIFE

Engler was hugely pleased. His enjoyment showed in lines around his flat nose, his thick mouth, his glinting green eyes. John looked into those eyes, looked and felt as though he were sinking into some deep mire.

The blond man came farther into the kitchen. John saw his freckled hand come up as he gestured, too mildly, toward the door.

"Were you thinking of leaving?"

The bundle in John's arms stirred in mild protest and he realized that he must have been gripping Old Gran too firmly about her waist, her aged knees. And over and above his sense of defeat, there rose the need to protect the little old lady, to remove her, before Alfred Borton should come in here.

She knew, too, that something unforeseen, something unpleasant had happened. It seemed as though she were asking him to put her down, and this was the expression of John's own thought.

He told Engler, almost flatly, "I was going to bring Old Gran out here for a little change."

"Out here? You mean, the kitchen?" Engler came

nearer, to the center table. "You've got her well bundled up."

"She was chilly." John looked down into the lined face. "All right, I'll take you back to your chair," he said. Engler might very well know she could not hear, but John talked on, talked and moved back to the room from whence he had just come. "I'll put you back in your chair. You can come out later."

He had her in her room again, in her chair. Engler was at his back, and John was aware of him, aware of that weapon in the thick hand. But in spite of the sick feeling in the pit of his stomach, John kept alert to the danger which threatened the old lady. She must be kept in here. He must find something to occupy her at once, to hold her in her chair.

At her side was the low table with an empty plate, a minute mound of threads which must have been salvaged from the rug, and there was the knife, the knife which Gran used to manicure her nails quite to her own satisfaction.

John almost thrust it into her hands, closing her fingers over the handle, patting them reassuringly. Then, quickly, he turned and came toward Engler, and the instant he had cleared the doorway, he shut Old Gran away.

It had been such a small victory, of uncertain duration, but it had been something. For the moment, the old lady was safe enough. John's head felt clear-

er, the panic that pounded in his throat abated. He met the green eyes cooly enough.

Engler said, "Where's the rest?"

John shrugged. "I don't know. I was told to wait here."

"Oh, you were told to wait here!"

"That's right."

Engler's lips spread. John saw the big teeth parted slightly in front. It was an ugly pretense of a smile. Engler said, "And you hauled the old woman around here, waiting!" The revolver came nearer, forcing John to retreat backward, nearer to the door. "Suppose you tell me the truth? Where are they?"

There was a commotion from beyond the kitchen door and, over the confusion, John recognized Sargus's voice.

"But they couldn't have gone far, I tell you! They must be in the house!"

Alex Havill must have joined the group, must have gleaned something of what had happened to Sargus from his appearance. Suddenly there came the blare of the deep voice.

Trouble was on the way, John knew, but immediate disaster at Engler's hand was removed. The big man's interest was on his fellows. He moved, still keeping his gun trained on John, toward the back door. John, making the most of the opportunity, edged ever so slightly away from Old Gran's room,

nearer to the back table.

The door suddenly burst open. Alfred Borton came in first, the others following. The secretary's eye darted at John, but it was Sargus who screeched, "He didn't get away. I told you!"

Sargus was not a pretty sight. The gag had not improved the expression around the pulled-up mouth. There was a red line there. The imprint of the cords that had bound him was on his wrists and he stood uncertainly, buoyed up by the strength of his fury. Fists clenched, he made a futile effort to leap at John, but Alex Havill's hand stayed him, shoved him backward. He fell against the sink.

Alex Havill said, grimly, "You're a fool, Sargus, another blunderer. I'll handle this."

John was seeing the man for the first time. He was not tall, but disgustingly fat. A second chin sagged over a low, wilted collar. His shoulders sloped in a boxy wrinkled coat. John saw this in a glance, but the eyes of the man held him. "Eyes like a fish," Bert Oberg had said, and perhaps that was near enough. The wide black brim of an unblocked hat came down over them, but John saw death in those eyes. He felt the hair at the base of his neck seem to protest, as though a cold wind had blown upon him and he thought of the revolver that had belonged to Sargus, and which was now inside his own heavy shirt. Now it would be impossible to reach it quick-

ly enough.

Alex Havill had a weapon, too. In his short, pudgy fingers, he held it very still. The cold eyes considered John, took him in from head to foot, then dismissed him, moved away.

Alex Havill said to Engler, "He was the only one in here?"

"Him and the old woman." Engler gestured with a thumb in the direction of the closed door. "He was carrying her out when I spotted him."

"Carrying her?" Alex Havill concentrated on John again. He said, turning to Alfred Borton, "There was no way out but the back door?"

"No," the secretary said staunchly. "I know this place like a book. The rest of them are probably hiding somewhere, but they're here! They couldn't get out. We would have seen them."

Engler spoke up, "That's so. I was watching at the back. I would have spotted them."

Alex Havill's gun hand gestured impatiently, and Engler seemed to draw away. John caught a movement back in the rear hallway, and saw the slight figure of an elderly man. His face was turned away, toward the greater lounge, and John guessed that this must be Mr. Doffer. He was a friend of Lyman Nuhart's, perhaps. He was looking about, hoping for a chance to warn him of what was to come.

But Lyman Nuhart was out of harm's reach by

now. He and Bert Oberg and Dud must have made it into the secret passageway. They would be moving along now, going toward the cellar of the Hill House. Soon they would find Leetha.

Only he and Old Gran were left.

John tried to fight through the tumult that surged in his brain. He was here, surrounded by the lot of them—Alex Havill, Alfred Borton, Engler. Sargus was cringing against the sink. Mr. Doffer was in the rear hallway. It was a formation that would be hard to break. The odds were all against him. But if he were to make a sudden plunge, if he were to act swiftly enough, he might succeed in disarming Engler, might rip the gun from the fat hand of Havill.

Before he was really aware of it, John had swung with one moccasined foot, kicking upward. He felt the impact over his toes, and knew that he had kicked not only Engler's hand, but the gun itself. The man must have reeled backward, striking the table. It overturned. As Engler went crashing to the floor, John was completing his surprise attack. He crouched for an instant, then sprang for Alex Havill's hand. He felt the soft flesh and heard the report of the revolver, even as he knew that Sargus, from whom he had expected no trouble, had lunged for his legs. John felt himself falling. He heard a babble of cries; one of the voices was his own. Then it seemed they were all upon him.

As though a second self were being punished, John felt the rain of blows, the weight that pressed him flat to the floor. Something wet was thrust over his mouth—a towel, with the scent of soap still on it. John thought vaguely that it was the same towel he had used—so Old Gran would not cart it away. She carted everything away. But not any more. He had failed her. He had failed.

The weight, and the fists, and the rope that was cutting into his wrists and ankles lost meaning. John went beyond the present into oblivion.

But it could not have been long that the darkness lasted. It could have been only the matter of a few minutes. It seemed that he only closed his eyes, then opened them. There was no clouded interlude. He was instantly aware of what had happened. Startingly clear was his recollection of the thing that Alex Havill had planned.

He was going to burn Hawk's Nest.

There was a hushed drumming in his head, and with all his will John forced himself to hear over and above it. He caught other sounds. The trickle of water from a faucet in the sink. The ticking of the clock. The wind sucking at a shade, perhaps the lowered shade in Old Gran's room.

That might mean that her door was open!

John could see the base of the great stove. He could see a long-handled strainer, an egg-beater,

what seemed to be a potato masher. These must have scattered from the drawer of the center table when Engler had overturned it. John knew that he was lying where the table had been. It must now be behind him, nearer to the sink.

But he wanted to face Old Gran's room. He wanted to see if her door was open.

Hunching himself around, he came in line with the table at the back window, with Old Gran's door.

It was open. Not much. But it was open. The flapping sound of the shade must come from there.

Again, John strained his ears to catch another sound, the sound of footsteps. Had Alex Havill completed his preparation for the holocaust? Had he already set fire to Hawk's Nest? Had he left with his henchmen?

The place was still, too still.

And then John heard the creak of the rocking chair. Old Gran was still in her room, sitting in her rocking chair. Under a different set of circumstances, it would conjure up a satisfying picture—the little old lady, swaying back and forth.

John had a giddy sensation that the rockers were over his head, that he was becoming a part of their movement, that he was going back and forth. He thought frantically, "This won't do! I can't pass out."

He forced his eyes open, stared at the open door.

Old Gran was in her chair, all right. She was sitting there, perhaps as he had left her.

And he had left her with a knife in her hands, a sharp little knife which she used very deftly to do her nails.

A sharp little knife was what he needed—to cut the ropes from his feet and from his wrists. He wondered if Sargus had had a hand in his trussing. The way his ankles were bound, jabbing into each other, had been viciously expert work.

John concentrated on the open door again. He could not call out to the old lady, he could not utter more than a hoarse gurgle of sound. But that made little difference. If he should be able to shout at the top of his lungs, she would not hear him.

But she might come into the kitchen.

Even so, she would not see him.

And yet, she was his only hope. Old Gran with the sharp knife was the only way of salvation for them.

John thought, "I could crawl over there to her door, perhaps get in some way. But suppose she should get up suddenly and trip? She might hurt herself seriously, she might even nick me with her little knife!"

John turned his head again toward the stove. He thought he detected the smell of smoke coming from it.

There *was* the smell of smoke, but it did not come

from the stove. It came from the pantry-way, and the rear hall.

Smoke!

Alex Havill had completed his plan. He had set fire to Hawk's Nest. Unless John acted at once, he and Old Gran were doomed.

Almost frantically, John began to edge himself closer to her door. Somehow, some way, without harm to either one of them, he must make known his predicament, must bring her to free him.

On his right shoulder and his right hip, he began propelling himself across the floor. Some of the clutter from the table drawer must have been in his path. John heard the scrape of tin, and felt a jab in his side from one of the large spoons he had seen Bert Oberg take out.

The scrape of tin followed along, but there was something else, something that he scarcely felt, but it was there and, presently, he saw it. It was a ball of string.

The thing must have come unwound for several trailing feet. John was lying on the loose end, and the force of his knees against the ball had sent it moving along the floor, moving straight toward Old Gran's open door.

John did not know in that moment that so simple a thing as a ball of string, knotted here and there, would be the cause of his deliverance. He did see that

the door ahead was moving farther in, and that the old lady put a groping hand against the woodwork. Her left hand was on the panel. In her right was the little knife. She came out slowly, reaching for the table at the back window. John realized that she meant to put the knife down there. That was where it belonged.

But the old lady did not go to the table. In the doorway, she paused, and her sightless eyes lifted, turned right, left.

She said, "Bert, Bert, are you here? I smell smoke. Something is burning."

She did not expect an answer. It was evident that she had accustomed herself to giving her own answers. Moving toward the stove, John caught some of what she said. "It might be the stove. Yes, it could be the stove. They should be more careful."

And then she stepped on the ball. It had grown smaller in its travel across the floor, much smaller. But Old Gran wore soft slippers. She felt the pressure under her foot—perhaps it hurt her. She gave a whimpering cry and went down on her knees.

About three of the longest minutes John had ever lived he knew then.

That was the time it took Old Gran to examine the ball. She was surprised—annoyed, too. String should not be wasted, thrown about like this. Who could have dropped the ball so carelessly? She must

tell Bert when he came back. And Dennis, too. She must tell them about the smoke. They should clean the stove pipe.

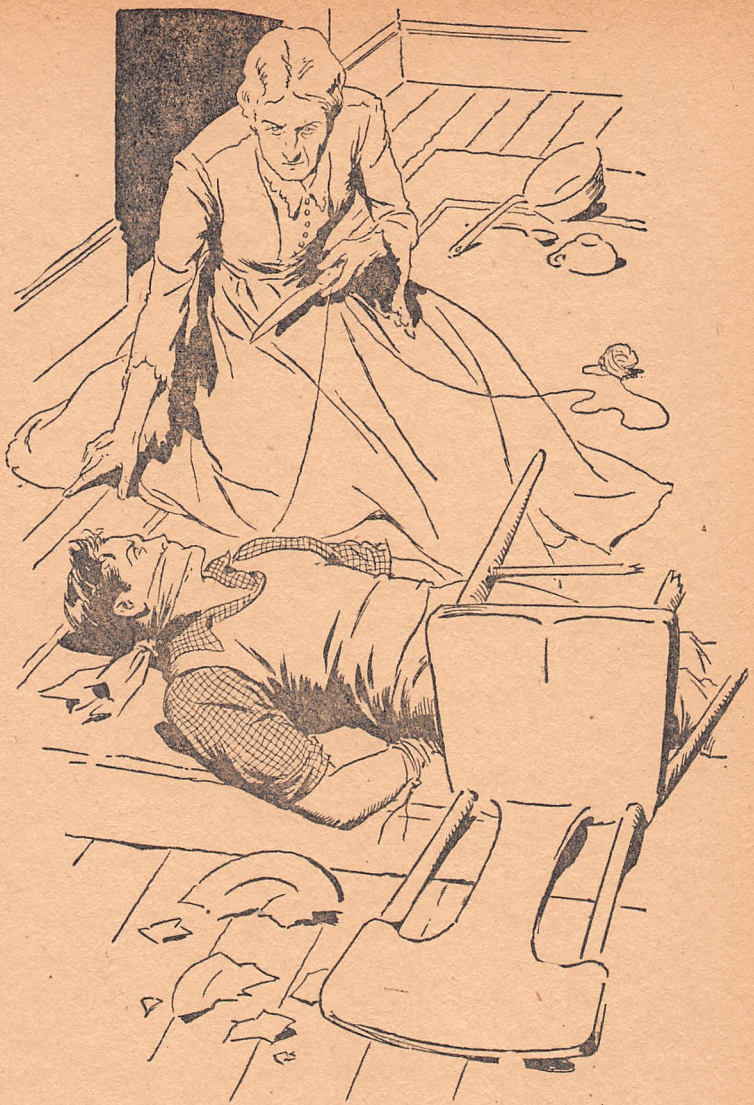
This was what she muttered to herself, as, maddeningly slow, she wound the string on the ball, came nearer and nearer, on her knees, to the place where John lay quietly, waiting.

His eyes were glued to that ball of string, glued to the fingers that worked so nimbly. For Old Gran still held the knife, too. The knife belonged on the back table, and there she intended to replace it. Now she kept the handle close against the palm of her hand. Over it, her thumb and middle finger held the ball.

It seemed an eternity until the old lady reached his side. She knew that the center table should stand here, and she reached upward to find the drawer, to replace the ball of string. But Old Gran felt the tug, felt the weight that held the loose end, and her left hand stretched about, seeking the obstacle, and finding John's shoulder.

"I wonder what's on the floor?" she said. "What is the matter with them?" The fingers touched John's head, the side of his cheek. "It's the boy," Old Gran said in wonderment. "The boy who came to see us."

John moved his cheek over her hand, begging her to reach the gag, begging her to find out that his



It Seemed an Eternity Until She Reached Him

hands and feet were tied.

She located the towel and recognized it. "Now why is that towel over his face?" Old Gran asked herself. "That shouldn't be there. It will hurt him."

She got the thing off. John ached to have her cut it but painstakingly she worked until she had slipped the thing upward, over his head.

The smell of smoke was growing stronger. Not only from the pantry-way, but from the rear hall as well. Unless they would leave soon, their way might be blocked. They would be hemmed in by the fire.

Keeping close to the old lady's knees, John hunched himself around. He heard her asking him what was the matter with him, why he stayed there on the floor. And then he had his hands toward her, so that she must find the ropes about his wrist.

"Strangers," Old Gran said when she felt the ropes. "It was strangers that did this. Strangers hurt the nice boy, too. They tied him up." The fingers slid in between John's hands, followed the way of the knots. "I can cut that rope," he heard her say. "That's too tight, and it hurts him. He shouldn't be tied like that."

John held his breath. He heard the murmuring, but scarcely understood what Old Gran was saying. He was attuned to the feel of the blade, the little sharp blade that was moving back and forth, slicing the ropes. He told himself that Bert Oberg would

not permit his mother to have possession of any harmful thing, that the old lady could handle the knife without harm to herself, so it must follow that cutting the rope would be a simple task. Nevertheless he felt the moisture gathering on his forehead, and the sound of his own heart deafened him to the soft voice.

She had said, "There. that thing's off now," before he knew that his hands were free.

When he realized it and moved his wrists, taking a precious moment to massage them, he was swinging himself around to face his benefactor. Old Gran was kneeling there, looking into his face, it seemed. The knife was held close to her shawl, away from him. She had sensed that he might move and did not want to hurt him.

"You can't see, and you can't hear, Gran," John said, and took the two fragile hands in his own, "but from the bottom of my soul—thanks to you!" He held her wrists, patted them, and gently began to withdraw the knife.

"You want the knife?" Old Gran said. "All right, all right. But be careful. It's sharp."

"I'll be careful," John said, and the ghost of a laugh grew in his throat. "I'll be mighty careful, Gran!" This was a grimmer note, for John had drawn himself painfully to a sitting position and was hacking away at the rope on his ankles. In a mo-

ment he was completely free, felt the mercy of being able to move hands and feet, to be able to stand.

He found that he did so without great discomfort. A sharp twinge shot through his legs. His feet were numb. But he could walk. Looking quickly down upon the old lady, seeing that she was not too near the stove, he went to the back door, opened it. A surge of smoke came to meet him, not from the lounge, nor from the stairs, but from the cellar itself. Fires were probably lighted at various points but the blaze in the cellar must have had a head start. Before he would dare to take Old Gran down to the drying room, John knew that he must make a trip alone, to see if the way were clear.

He no more than opened the door leading downward than he knew that it would be a hopeless task to attempt escape in that direction. A blast of heat, intermingled with the roar of flame, shot upward. John shut the door, went back through the rear hallway, back to the kitchen.

Now what?

He looked toward the pantry-way. Smoke was coming in from there. Bert Oberg's quarters, or the dining room, must be blazing. Perhaps both. But that made small difference. Escape did not lie in that direction.

John thought of the back door. Engler had been stationed out there before, but it would be a safe

guess that he was not there now. It would be too near the danger zone. Alex Havill and the lot of them must have returned to the Hill House.

Should he follow, carry Gran openly in the trail through the snow?

If Alex Havill had been satisfied that all was well, he might have left. John's thoughts, pounding, circling, caught on the snag of that word.

Left?

No, Alex Havill had not left. He could not leave. Leetha would have stopped him. By now she had drained the gas out of the sedan's tank. Or taken the keys. Or done something. Alex Havill *could* not leave.

He must still be there, in the Hill House. The others were there. They would spot him the moment he appeared. They were particularly eager to put him out of the way.

And he must carry Old Gran. He would have to move slowly. The two of them would be targets that could not be missed.

No, the back door was out. And the entrance to the passageway was out.

But he had to reach the passage!

He saw Old Gran. She was standing, her hands out before her. She was asking him where he went, what was wrong. When he did not come to her, she turned and started back toward the door of her

room slowly and hesitantly.

And John remembered.

There was the trapdoor in Old Gran's room, the trapdoor under the rug. It led to that smaller cellar which, in turn, gave onto the passage.

But the trapdoor was nailed shut, Leetha had said. It would have to be opened, and quickly. It was getting harder to breathe. Old Gran began to cough suddenly, and to whimper.

John rushed to the dark room, tore the shade from the window. He kicked aside the rug and saw the outline of the door there before him. There was a round ring of iron down in a groove. The ring would be to lift up the door. But there were no nails holding it down, only two good-sized screws. John got up and raced back into the kitchen.

Where would he find tools, something to work with?

In the scattering of implements over the floor, there was nothing with which he could work. But perhaps he might find what he needed in one of the cupboard drawers.

He ripped them out, one by one. Silver scattered, towels, but nothing that could be of service.

The smoke was coming in under the back door now, and an occasional tongue of flame. John turned again to the cupboard, kneeling before a line of drawers at the bottom. One by one, he pulled them

outward. Pots and pans, jars, frying pans, and at last the metal box. His hands grabbed for it, tore up the lid.

There were the tools, a hammer, a wrench, a pliers and a screwdriver. Grasping the box, John returned to Old Gran's room. He had been aware that she had gone in, but almost stumbled over her where she knelt on the floor, running her fingers over the bare boards. She was puzzling over the loss of her rug, looking for it, whimpering for Bert to come and take away the smoke.

John slammed the door behind them and went to work. It was not easy. This door had been tightly shut for a long time, years perhaps. And Old Gran was no help now. She found him there, working to take out the rusty screws and though John took precious moments to pat her hands reassuringly, he could not make her understand. Her cries grew, piteous, pleading, begging him not to spoil the floor, to stop the smoke, to take her to Bert and Dennis.

The fire was in the kitchen before John got the door open. The flame followed along the walls of the very room where they were, licking along over their heads. But from the cellar room below there came the cold damp air. John looked down the narrow flight of steps, and remembered that Old Gran would need something to keep her warm.

The comforter was there, in her rocking chair

John gathered it up and placed it about the protesting shoulders. Old Gran was seated at the edge of the farther bed. She did not want to leave the spot.

John talked to her, pressed her hands, drew her toward him. "We've got to go, Gran!" he besought her. "We haven't a minute to spare. You've got to trust me. You did before." His hands went around her shoulders. "Come, Gran. Put your hands around my neck. I'll take you to Bert."

She could not hear him, but she seemed to understand—partly. She quieted down and once more John had the bundle in his arms.

He was grateful for the flare that burst about them. It lighted the way down into the small cellar. Slowly, painstakingly, hoping against hope that the steps would hold their united weight, John moved into the dark hole. Old Gran felt heavier now. His wrists ached and the numbness crept up from his ankles. The fire was a bellow of rage overhead.

But he came to the earthen floor and blessed the fire. It showed him the walls of the small enclosure, the outline of the door to the main passageway. And John blessed Leetha for wanting to open that door. He pressed it farther in, eased himself sidewise, and the two of them reached the sanctuary of the main passage.

Old Gran was holding his shoulders in a grip of terror. She was crying to him to take her away

from this dreadful place. Carrying the old lady as she protested, the folds of the quilt impeding his progress in the blackness—it was no simple task. John could not move fast; indeed it seemed he crawled along. Many times he came perilously near to falling, but he caught himself. His shoulders and arms bashed against the side walls because he was careful to take the brunt himself, careful not to harm Old Gran.

At last, when it seemed that he could go no farther, when his weary muscles refused obedience, when the dampness and the dark came up like a swallowing mouth, John saw far, far ahead the glimmer of a light, and it was as though a spark enkindled in his spirit.

They were ahead, his friends, Lyman Nuhart, Bert Oberg, Dud—and, yes, and Leetha. Perhaps she had returned from her mission. Perhaps she had succeeded, was waiting for him now to form their further plan for the capture of Alex Havill.

Old Gran felt the change in him. Her little cries were less of fear. Her hands were not so frantic about his neck. John heard her say, "Are we coming to Bert now?" And John said, "Yes, Gran, yes! We're almost there. Almost there—!"

And then, high and clear, striking down through the passage, John heard a scream of terror.

It was Leetha's voice.

CHAPTER TWELVE

AT THE HILL HOUSE

For a moment of hateful indecision, John paused. He was still a good distance from the light that shone ahead, a firefly spark in a night of inky blackness. If he were to move onward, bearing Old Gran in his arms, it would take time, too much time, to reach the cellar of Hill House. But if he were to put the old lady down here, to wrap her in the comforter—

Even as John considered it, he knew it to be the wisest course. Old Gran would be safe enough, for a little while. Bert Oberg could come back and get her. Dud, too, perhaps. Between them, they could manage well, and John would be free to go to Leetha's side.

There was no further outcry, but the girl's scream echoed in his ears. What could have happened? Discovery, that was certain, but had she been harmed?

Old Gran was on the earthen floor, the quilt about her. John's hands fumbled, but he covered her as best he could. She did not understand the reason for his having put her down. She could not place herself in the cold, damp passageway, and her whimpering tore at John's heart while, with a set jaw, he

gently but firmly disentangled the clinging fingers from his arms.

"In a little while, Gran," he said. "Wait here. Bert will come. Be patient now."

He stood, faced the flickering light, and began to follow it.

It was so much easier, now that he had put down the old lady. He could hear her, but as he went resolutely forward, her voice dwindled.

Crowding in, blotting out the sound she made and the sound of his own feet against the loose stones, were the voices ahead.

Suddenly there was silence and the beam of the flash struck John full and blindingly in the face. He put one hand up to his eyes, motioned with the other to have the light lowered. It was done in the instant and Lyman Nuhart said, "Thank God, he's here!"

John rushed to the man. He saw that Bert Oberg was with him. The door at the end of the passage was shut.

John said, "What happened? Was Leetha hurt?" He looked about. "Where's Dud?"

"In there," Lyman Nuhart pointed beyond the door. "We heard her crying and Dud went in. The door shut, John. We can't get it open!"

Lyman Nuhart held the flashlight, had evidently been holding it while Bert Oberg struggled to lift the bolt. But Bert Oberg had left the door. He was

at John's side, pulling at his arm. In the fringe of the flashlight's glow, John saw the man's face, graven with fear. "My mother—?" he said. "Is she—?"

"She's back there," John pointed. "In the passage."

"Oh—" it was a groan of relief from Bert Oberg. But John was in an anguish of uncertainty. If Bert Oberg were to go for his mother—and he must go—he would need the flashlight. Lyman Nuhart, to be sure, should go with him, for Dud was not here now. Dud was on the other side of this closed door, with Leetha. And Leetha had screamed.

John shoved the light into Bert Oberg's hands.

"Go back there and get her," he said. "And hurry. She might fall—hurt herself."

Lyman Nuhart said, haltingly, "But, Leetha—? The door?"

"I'll get it open. I opened it before. Take the light—and go. Both of you."

"But you can't see—!" Lyman Nuhart began. John cut in, "I can feel. I opened it before, I tell you. And—I've got the gun."

He remembered it in that instant. He had the gun. It was still there, inside his shirt, ready. His fingers began to move over the wall. He found the bolt, the bar that lifted. It had been slippery before, and it was slippery now. Bert Oberg had lingered for a moment, but he and Lyman Nuhart were walking

away, back to where Old Gran was waiting. There was no light to see by, nothing. John thought of Old Gran. It was always this way with her, always dark. If Old Gran could slit a rope from his ankles and his wrists, he should be able to get this door open. He tried to remember how he had pressed on it before. It had been upward, and inward, toward the wall. John pressed, pressed again and met with his reward. He felt the wall giving under his hands and saw the slice of light ahead.

So far, he thought, so good. Now what?

Now he must move cautiously. That row of shelves was on the other side of the door. He must not come crashing through.

Straining his ears for a sound from the cellar, he flattened himself against the wall and pushed slowly, cautiously, bringing his head into the opening, then one shoulder.

The shelves seemed farther away. There was room enough for him to enter. There were wide spaces between the shelves, open boards, and John found that he need not try to go around them; he could bend and creep through, as one would crawl through a fence. Stooping, he put one foot through the opening, his chest went over, then his other foot. He was in the storage room. Around him was the litter of jars, bottles, and cans, the articles which had fallen. Only for an instant, John contemplated his sur-

roundings. He heard the sound of movement and started for the one door in this place. It was a wooden door, and it was closed. It sagged. John guessed it had shut itself. Cautiously, John pushed it open.

He was facing what was almost a bare room. There was an accumulation of stone slabs at the far end, several pieces of broken furniture. In front of this, looking straight at him, stood Leetha and Dud. They seemed to be cringing back, and John soon saw why. Engler was there. His back was toward John. He did not see him; evidently he had not heard John come through the hidden door. John heard him talking.

"There were tracks there to the car—your tracks!" He pointed at Leetha. "You went out there alone, didn't you?" His high rasping voice cut through the damp air. Leetha shrank backward before it and she must have caught the movement of the door behind which John was standing. Her eyes went upward, and she saw him.

John motioned to her frantically not to give evidence that she had seen him, not to be afraid.

Leetha's eyes fell, then lifted to Engler's face. She said, "Yes, I went out there alone. I went out the cellar door." She pointed to the right, to a place John could not see.

"How did you get in here?" Engler hissed. "And

you—?" he spat at Dud. "How did you get in?"

He must have been asking his question for a second, a third time, and the two, to shield the others, had remained silent. But they were both frightened, both sick with terror. Perhaps that had helped them to keep still.

Only now John could see color coming back into the girl's white face. She did not look at him again, but John knew she understood that he meant to make a surprise attack upon Engler. Perhaps Dud had seen him, too, and had gained hope. But if he had, the boy gave no sign. The two kept staring at the blond man, and Dud said, "I walked here—from the Nest."

"That's a lie. We would have seen you."

"You were out near the side road," Dud said, and John knew for certain the boy had seen him. He was standing straighter, looking at Engler. "You didn't see me because you weren't looking."

A mutter of voices came from overhead, and the sound of footsteps.

"There's no one up here," Alex Havill growled to someone at his side and he called downstairs to Engler, "Have you found anyone?"

Engler said, "Yes. Come and see."

Alfred Borton said, "Who is it? Did he let the gas—?"

Alex Havill growled again and they came pound-

ing into the cellar room. At the sight of the two young people, Leetha and Dud, they were greatly surprised. Alex Havill's voice rent the air. "You did that?" He advanced toward Dud. "How did you get here? Who came with you?"

Leetha almost leaped in front of him. "I did it!" she said clearly.

Dud tried to distract them. "I came here from the Nest," he cut in. "You were out in the back."

Then they both began to talk together, each trying to shield the other, until Alex Havill's rumbling command forced them to silence.

He said, too smoothly, "Sargus—" The man with the scar stepped within John's vision. "Sargus, we are losing time. Perhaps you can persuade them." The dark man nodded, put one hand to his belt which was not only a belt but a vicious whip. Perhaps Leetha did not know this, but Dud did and he cried out, "Don't you hurt her! She didn't do anything!"

Alex Havill said, "Keep still." He nodded again to the man with the scar. "I want to know how they came here, who else is here." One thick, white hand gestured, and the length of leather leaped in Sargus's hand.

It did not swing out. Not because Sargus was too weak to wield the thing, but because John's hand had been on the trigger of Sargus's own revolver.

They had not expected the roar of sound which filled the cellar—that, and the cry of anguish which came from the drawn-up lips drew all attention away from Leetha and Dud.

In the moment of frenzy, there was time for John to emerge from his hiding place, to stand with his back against the wooden door, facing them. Engler was to the right, nearer the open cellar door. Stairs went up at the left and Alfred Borton was there. Behind him was old Mr. Doffer. Alex Havill was almost in front of John. Crouching against the wall ahead, near Dud's side, was Sargus, grasping his wounded wrist with his left hand.

Doffer would not fight. Doffer was a friend despite his enforced stand with the enemy. Sargus was out of it now. But there were the other three, and they were scattered about the cellar room.

John's first thought was to get them together in an open place, away from the stairs. He heard his own voice, thickly, "Get over there, by the cellar door. All of you."

They did as he told them, but like animals in a pen, wary, ready to leap at their trainer. John had the satisfaction of seeing the dumbfounded astonishment in their faces at the sight of him, and he recollected swiftly that he must be a sorry sight. The recent hours had not been passed idly. But he was aware of their hatred, their rebellion, too. And

more, of their fear.

They had accomplished only one small part of their task. They had set fire to Hawk's Nest. It must be a roaring mass by now. It seemed John heard something of the sound of the falling timbers. The cellar door was partly open. The sound might be coming in there.

Or it might be coming from the hidden door, where Bert Oberg and Lyman Nuhart had returned with Old Gran. With all his soul, John hoped they would remain away, out of sight.

He saw that the men were moving across the cement floor, and the sound of the fire seemed to increase in fury. John felt something warm at the side of his face and put his free hand there swiftly, to wipe it away. His hand came away sticky and he knew that there was a cut on his head. When had he been hurt? When they had tied him up? When he had carried Old Gran? When he had come in here?

He did not know. But as he stood there, watching the slow progress of the five men across the floor, he became conscious of the sting of pain. While he was moving, running, fighting, he had not known the pain. But now that he was standing still—

The five men seemed to form a circle, to draw in closer to him, and to go back again, like wolves tantalizing a hunter. John knew that Leetha and Dud were still in the room. It seemed that Dud made a

kind of sign to him that Leetha cried out his name. John thought that she was crying again because she was afraid, because she thought that he was going to fail them.

It was too bad, he thought, to have managed fairly well this far, and not to be able to finish the job. They were so scattered. Leetha and Dud were in here; Lyman Nuhart, Bert Oberg, and Old Gran were in the passageway. They should be together, safe and sound, on one side. On the other, their hands tied, the others should be ready for the authorities. Our side, John thought, and their side.

But he felt a growing weakness. His thoughts were fraying out, frazzling. They would not wind into a sensible pattern.

When the five men became, suddenly, five faces which grinned at him hideously, he heard Leetha's voice again and noted with surprise that she did not sound afraid, far from it. Her cry was one of joy, intense relief. Dud was shouting, too. He sounded pleased about something.

And John heard the other voice, which seemed to be several men speaking at once. He had to lean backward, to stand against the wooden door for support, but he looked over to the steps which led up into the Hill House.

Feet were coming toward him, big, substantial-looking feet. John knew that his hand which held

Sargus's gun had gone down to his side, but it was an insupportable weight. He stood weakly, looking at the advancing feet. His eye traveled upward, over the trousers jammed into thick boots, to the fur coat, and then he saw the lean bewhiskered face. He tried to give it a name, for surely he had seen that face before, even though the others there on the stairs were strangers.

The fur-clad man said, "Well, son, gettin' yourself into a peck of trouble?"

And John knew. It was Theo Wood.

Even as John placed him, Leetha was calling out his name. "Theo—oh, Theo!" And Dud was shouting something, asking the man where he came from, how the others happened to be there. John thought Dud said one of the men was the sheriff.

Theo Wood had a shotgun in his hands. Three men were with him and they had guns. Theo Wood said, "The cellar door's quickest. Get 'em out that way."

There was a scuffling that seemed to mount until it filled the place and the five were herded away, through the cellar door. John felt Theo Wood's hand on his arm. Leetha was standing near his side, Dud with her. Theo Wood said to Leetha, "Where's your grandpa? And where's Oberg and Gramma? You didn't leave them to burn in th' Nest, did y'?"

The fog cleared in John's brain. He shook his

"Well, Son, Gettin' Yourself into Trouble?"

head to remove the last confusing blur.

"No," he told Theo Wood. "They're safe."

Leetha was crying, "Where are they, John? Did they get to the passage in time?"

Dud said, "Sure. We came together. John brought Old Gran." He looked at John. "You got her, didn't you?"

"Sure," John nodded his head. It felt light, almost unattached from his shoulders. He stepped away from the wooden door and went into the storage room. "Oberg!" he called with an effort, but his voice seemed far away. "Oberg, come on out."

Theo Wood was peering over his shoulder. "Come on out of where?" he questioned. "I don't see no way t' come."

But Bert Oberg had heard, and, without trouble this time, he opened the door. They came around the row of shelves, banging into them, but it did not matter now. They were safe enough. There was Lyman Nuhart, Old Gran, and Bert Oberg holding on to her, letting her walk. She was scolding him, telling him she was getting her lovely quilt dirty in this cellar, and John had a sudden wish to laugh. Old Gran might miss a lot of the world's joys, but many of its sorrows were removed from her, too.

John bent to help lift the trailing ends of the comforter, to help her out into the main room of the cellar where they were all gathering. The place

reverberated with the mingling of their talk, the questions, the endless questions. But John still heard Old Gran. She was scolding him now. Asking him why he left her back there in that dreadful place.

John patted her hands and kept his arms about her shoulders.

It was Theo Wood who marshalled them all up the cellar steps and into the Hill House. It was a one floor structure, fashioned of logs. It belonged and yet it did not, to Hawk's Nest. John welcomed its warmth and comfort.

They went through the kitchen into a living room. There were leather chairs, a leather sofa, and they all were seated, with Theo Wood standing before the fireplace. He was answering Lyman Nuhart's questions, why and how he had come to be here at this time.

"Frankie," he said, "called me several kinds of a meddlin' fool, but I had a hunch something was up. I kept an eye on him." He nodded toward John. "Rosie and I, we drove up and down the road. It looked as though Frankie was right, until I saw that feller comin' out in John's clothes. I thought first it was you, John, but when y' didn't give me any sign, I looked closer. I knew it wasn't you."

John was on the leather couch. Leetha was on one side of him, Old Gran on the other. The girl had

brought out a handkerchief, a small useless-looking little thing, and was looking at John's head. He heard her say, "Oh, John, does it hurt much?"

John told her it did not, and nodded to Theo Wood. "It's a good thing you stuck around," he said.

"Ain't it?" Theo Wood agreed happily. His mustache moved as though he were tasting his importance and finding it pleasant. "Well, sir, I followed him into town, keeping back far enough, of course, and I saw this feller take the train. Then I went for the sheriff."

Lyman Nuhart said feverishly, "We're deeply indebted to you, Theo."

"I should say so!" Leetha added, and turned again to John. "But John was there. He—he stopped them." Horror returned, and Leetha shuddered at the remembrance of what was gone.

Bert Oberg spoke up. He was standing behind his mother, one hand on her shoulder. "If it weren't for John," he paused a moment, "we'd be burned alive!"

Dud was looking out a window. He choked, "Heck—yes!"

Lyman Nuhart came to his feet. He said, as though remembering something he had forgotten for a long time, "Burned!" And he went to the window where Dud was standing. "They were going to—" Again he paused, for he could see the flames, the smoke. They

rose high, over the moving timbers which slanted at crazy angles. John saw them, too. Not the lower part of the house—that was not visible. But the highest point, where the roof went up so sharply—the timbers there were falling.

Lyman Nuhart moved suddenly toward a door. A gust of cold air came into the room with the sound of the crackling wood. The master of Hawk's Nest went out to watch the ruin of his mansion and Leetha, sensing his suffering and perhaps sharing it, went swiftly to join him.

Bert Oberg remained at his mother's side and Dud came over. The two said nothing, but the look that passed between them spoke volumes. John realized vaguely that Old Gran was talking to her son. She wanted to know when all the strangers would leave and when she could go back to her rocking chair.

Her rocking chair—that was gone, too. Everything was gone for all of them. But for Lyman Nuhart it must have been the heaviest loss.

Whether or not to leave the man alone in his sorrow, John debated, but he got up suddenly and went out to where the master of Hawk's Nest was standing, the girl at his side. He saw them framed against the glow of the fire, the man as straight as a soldier, the girl's shining head held proudly on erect shoulders.

John said, and it sounded empty, "I'm sorry, sir."

Lyman Nuhart turned to him. A rueful smile played about the firm lips. He shook his head. "It may be just as well." He nodded toward a rise of ground ahead. "Let's go up there. I want to see—something."

They walked slowly, in silence, and when they came within view of the house, John saw the old man's head turn to the left wing of the house, to the archway. He knew that Lyman Nuhart was looking to see if the hawk were still there, the hawk on the coiling whip.

Enveloped in flames, the figure still held, but even as they stood there, John saw it give. The movement was not quick. It seemed that the black wings were soaring gently, easily downward. But near to the ground, the arch caved in. There was a crash, an uprising of red, and the hawk was no more to be seen.

John blurted out, "He lied to you, Mr. Nuhart. He made you believe that your partner was—was after you. That's why he kept his job here—as your bodyguard."

Lyman Nuhart whirled about. "What did you say?" he demanded. "What do you mean?"

John felt his face flush. "It was what we heard." He looked at Leetha. She said quickly, "Yes, Grandfather. We heard them talking—when we were in the passage. Alfred made it all up. I don't think Mr.

Morrow ever said or wrote any of the things Alfred pretended."

"Alfred made it up," Lyman Nuhart repeated dully, "so that I would keep him on." His face seemed to come alive. "And I believed him. I thought that—"

Leetha's hand was on his arm. "It's over now, Grandfather. We—we don't mind losing Hawk's Nest—do we?"

"No, Leetha." The man was actually smiling. "We don't mind losing Hawk's Nest. We lost it, in a sense, long ago." He murmured, as though they were not there, as though he were talking to himself, "We were smart as a hawk and sharp as a whip. I'll find Reid Morrow. It's not too late."

They all heard the crunching in the snow and turned. Theo Wood was coming toward them. He looked at the blaze ahead and then ignored it. It was as though he believed they had spent enough time mourning their loss, that they must come to the present as they found it.

"The sheriff's got 'em all put away," he said with abounding cheer. "Nobody more capable than Sheriff Cunningham." He gestured with his head toward the Hill House. "He's back there now. Wants t' know if you'd like to tell him some of the whys and wherefores of that smart aleck secretary and his no-good pals. They've found some papers—plenty of

evidence that they were all part of a spy ring. They thought Hawk's Nest would make a safe headquarters, I guess. Decided to get rid of everybody at the end." A mittened hand came up to smooth his whiskers, right, left, from a smiling mouth. "Oberg's told him a heap already, and I took th' opportunity t' say old Doffer got mixed up there by mistake." He cocked a wise eye at John. "That right, son?"

John said fervently, "That's right, Mr. Wood. They were forcing him against his will—"

"That's what I said," Theo Wood cut in. "Oberg says the same thing. Dud does, too. Doffer will spill the whole story."

"We heard them talking, Theo," Leetha said staunchly. "We know for sure Mr. Doffer didn't want to help them."

"All right," Theo Wood dismissed the subject. "Now, seems t' me, you better cut this visit a little short and come over t' our place." He squinted at John, skimming over him from his head to his moccasined feet. "You look like a razor'd do some good. Mebbe a little soap an' water and some adhesive tape. Frankie knows how t' slap it on."

Leetha became apologetic. "Oh, Theo, yes!" she cried. "John's hurt—and here we stand—talking!"

"I'm all right," John protested, and felt Theo Wood's hand on his arm. The man said, as they moved toward the Hill House, " 'Tain't suppertime

yet, but I thought you could all have a bite."

John thought, "Suppertime!" and he said, "What time is it?"

"Oh, four, five—"

John laughed. "No wonder we felt woozy." He looked at Leetha. "We missed out on our dinner, didn't we?"

The girl's smile was grateful. John was explaining her brief lapse when she had fallen there in the passage, explaining to himself, too, the dizziness that had come over him.

He was hungry. He was starved.

And he said so.

Theo Wood grinned. "We'll ask Sheriff Cunningham t' come over with us. He's got his car, and I got th' sleigh. Rosie won't mind."

Lyman Nuhart said, "But—those others, Theo. How did they—?"

"Deputies," Theo Wood said promptly. "I came prepared."

John agreed heartily, "I'll say you did!"

He had the warm and comfortable feeling that all would be well. A new home, a better home would be made for all of them. Lyman Nuhart looked like a man wakened from a bad dream. He was awake now, and the friends he had gathered about him would share in his happiness and peace.

John said suddenly, "Mr. Wood, don't let me for-

get to call the Hayfords." He smiled at Leetha. "I've got to let Mrs. Parker know that everything's okay at Hawk's Nest."

"Oh, yes!" Leetha cried. "I'll have her again—for keeps."

Lyman Nuhart was looking ahead, at the Hill House. It was not large, but large enough for the time being. He said, deeply, "Yes, my boy, tell her all is well—at Hawk's Nest."

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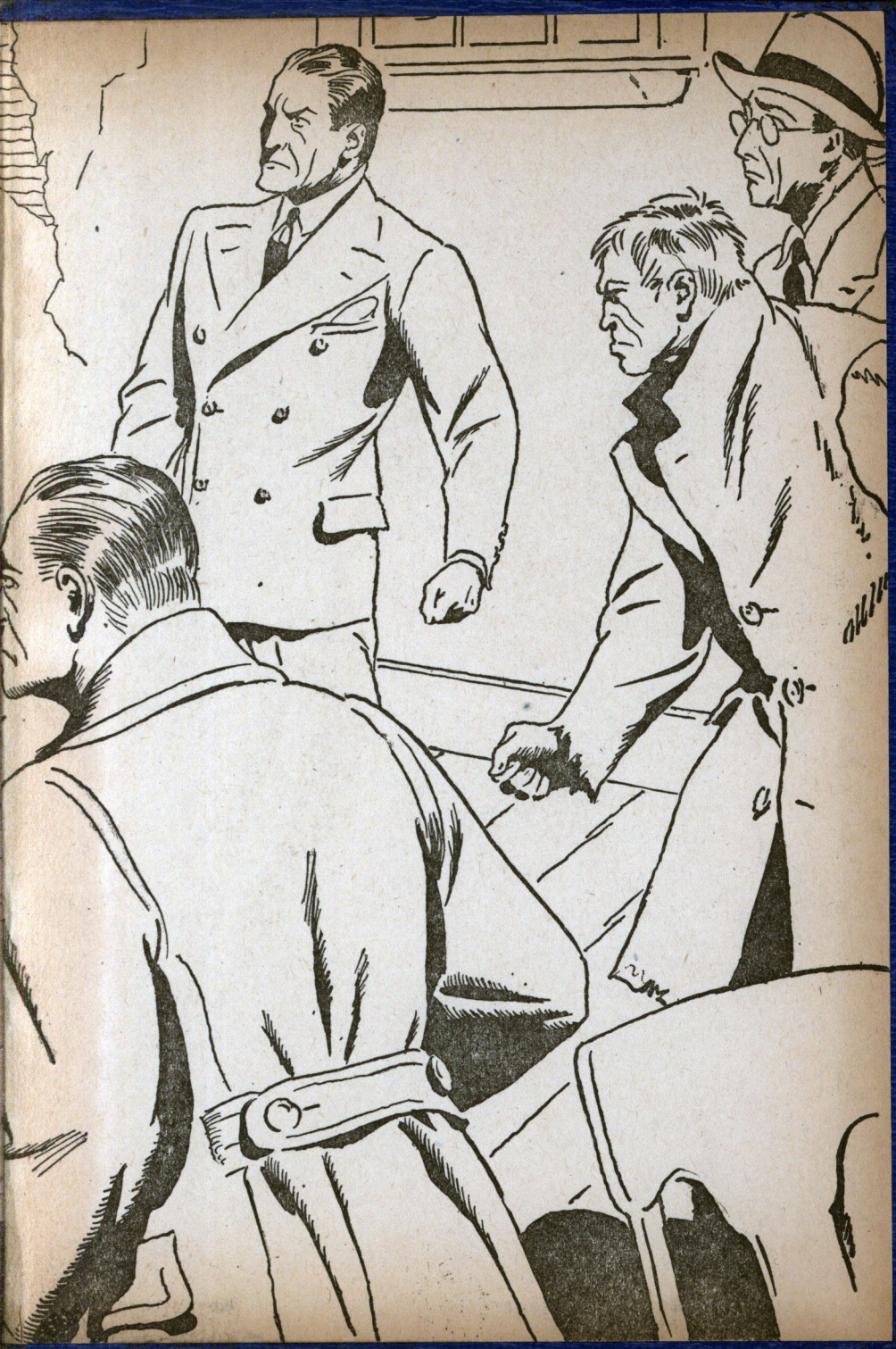
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